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Agroecology as a Social Movement

– A case study of the Prince George's County Food
Equity Council in Maryland, United States

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United States

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FOREWORD

I began the Agroecology Master Program at SLU two years ago, thinking I would learn how to sustainably farm in urban areas, or perhaps build an entire garden out of recycled materials. In the time since my start, I have gone through a paradigm transformation. The most difficult step for me was to immerse myself in systems thinking; it took the better part of these two years to completely understand it. Also, I did not come to fully appreciate what agroecology *is* until I went through this thesis research journey.

Learning agroecology has been an intimate experience, and perhaps the biggest takeaways for me are not tangible skills. I do not, for example, feel qualified to work at the farm level, as practical experience is something I have not developed (I am a social science mind, through and through). Rather, the skills I have developed are a bit softer. Agroecology has taught me the importance of process and introspection. Through my study I have learned that a healthy system is one that is continuously reflecting and communicating with its components. A healthy system recognizes that the world is not static; as such, there is no end result. From my understanding, the only static part of a system is the iterative nature of learning and innovating.

The biggest question I have is, “so what?” Leaving university, I wonder how likely it is that the world will adopt such holistic thinking. If it took me two years to understand the concept of the systems approach – in an environment highly conducive to learning – how will others do the same? As a citizen of the United States, I am acutely aware of the deplorable situation of my country’s food and agriculture. I went into this program somewhat dismayed by the lack of political will to make things right, and the absence of democracy in my country’s food system. My time with the Prince George’s County Food Equity Council showed me that people are not complacent anymore. Communities are realizing that if things are to change, they must join together and catalyze the change. In line with systems thinking, people are realizing that we wield a heavier impact when we work together, when we integrate our many components and interests, when we adopt a paradigm which acknowledges our inherently interconnected nature. This heartens and inspires me, and I believe the rolling ball has just started moving, soon to accumulate enough momentum to create fair and resilient food systems.

Emma Tozer

12 September, 2016

SUMMARY

The United States has experienced a drastic change in its food system within the last century. A locally-based, self-sufficient model has been replaced by one that is characterized by a consolidation of business and farms into fewer hands; a mechanization and specialization of agriculture management; and the looming threat of urban development encroaching on farmland. On the other side of the food supply chain, consumers in the U.S. are increasingly susceptible to obesity and diet-related illnesses, even though a substantial part of the population is food insecure. Low-income communities feel these ailments the most, as the most affordable food in these areas is highly processed, grain-based, and calorie dense, yet lacking in nutrition. Compounded with these flaws is the country's fragmented and contradictory policy approach to food and agriculture.

In response to these numerous systemic shortfalls, hundreds of food movements have developed and expanded in the U.S. and around the world: local food, Slow Food, community food security, food justice, food sovereignty, fair trade, and agroecology. In recent years, researchers have explored the local food policy council movement as an opportunity to converge these various interests. By joining a diverse group of community stakeholders, local food policy councils can potentially develop comprehensive food policies which are responsive to local needs. This study is inspired by this potential, as well as the potential of agroecology movements as enablers for systemic policy change. In 2009, Wezel et al. categorized agroecology as a scientific discipline, agricultural practice, and social movement. In movement form, agroecology often works in conjunction with other food movements for mutual benefit. This thesis research set out to gain a clearer understanding of agroecology as a social movement, and to understand its relationship to food policy councils.

A case study was conducted of the Prince George's County Food Equity Council (FEC) in Maryland, U.S., using three main methods of data collection: semi-structured interviews, direct observations, and archival records and documents. The research assumed a systems approach and constructivist paradigm. Data was analyzed by testing for the presence of agroecology principles – namely, 'inclusivity', 'community orientation', and a 'food systems approach' –, which were determined from a preliminary literature review. In addition, analysis considered concepts from social movement literature.

It was found that the FEC works to include a diversity of stakeholders from across the food supply chain, including members of the general public. The principle of community orientation is present in the FEC's policy activities. For example, the decision to name the council a food equity council, rather than a food policy council, was based on the FEC's acknowledgment that fairness is a prominent issue throughout Prince George's County's food system. Results from data collection indicate that the FEC's food systems approach is influenced by the member demographic of the council. It was found that the FEC – as well as many food policy councils – work to identify and break down barriers to the implementation of programs and policies. While councils strive to maintain a food systems approach in their activities, one challenge observed in the data and

literature is the acquisition and maintenance of a diversity of stakeholders representing the entire food supply chain.

The outcomes of the study show that food policy councils and agroecology movements share similar characteristics and values. As a social movement organization, food policy councils benefit from inclusion of an array of stakeholders, in that movement networks are both converged and expanded. These network connections can also facilitate engagement of a broader community population. In addition, the strengthening of these networks serves to benefit councils in the sense of resource mobilization: extensive, diverse network connections can facilitate a flow of knowledge, political capital, and other resources useful for furthering movement interests. These networks are characteristic of an alternative paradigm which has emerged in global justice movements. The paradigm emphasizes the importance of decentralized, participatory movement networks in bringing about social change. In this context, food policy councils offer an opportunity to coordinate, harmonize, and strengthen the various initiatives and interests of food movements.

ABBREVIATION LIST

CAFO – Concentrated animal feeding operation
 CEP – Community Eligibility Provision
 CSA – Community supported agriculture
 FEC – Prince George’s County Food Equity Council
 FPC – Food policy council
 IPHI – Institute for Public Health Innovation
 Port Towns CHP – Port Towns Community Health Partnership
 SMADC – Southern Maryland Agricultural Development Commission
 SNAP – Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
 USDA – United States Department of Agriculture

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INTRODUCTION: THE STATE OF FOOD AND AGRICULTURE IN THE U.S.

Over the last 100 years, the United States has gone from mostly self-sufficient, diversified, and localized food systems to systems which are embedded in global markets. According to reports from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (hereafter referred to as the USDA), at least half of the farmers at the beginning of the 20th century were producing a broad range of commodities – vegetables, fruits, grains, feed for livestock, and livestock – which were sold locally, if they were not first consumed on the farm (USDA, 2016b). Since then, the country has experienced a restructuring of agricultural production that has tended towards vertical integration of agribusiness. With livestock production, for example, the dynamic forces of mechanization and specialization have facilitated a shift towards the use of concentrated animal feeding operations, or CAFOs. At the beginning of the 20th century, chicken production was characterized by millions of backyard operations, but scientific advancements have allowed for the upscaling and vertical integration of broiler production, increasing both efficiency and profitability. The millions of backyard, seasonal, and multi-purpose chicken production schemes have come to be consolidated into less than 50 agribusiness firms which control the U.S. broiler industry (*ibid*).

As the tendency has been towards economies of scale, farmland has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of fewer farming operations: the number of farms has decreased from roughly seven million during World War II, to about two million, with large-scale corporate-controlled farms comprising 79 percent of production (Buttel, 1990:123; USDA, 2012; Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011). In an effort to boost the economic viability of their expensive machineries, farmers have restructured cropping systems to favor monocultural methods. This is because most farm machinery is specific to one type of crop, and is often only needed for short periods of time in the year (e.g. harvesting equipment). Removing intercropping and other diversification methods has allowed farmers to spread the cost of their machineries over greater land areas, minimizing per-unit production costs and ultimately creating a nationwide shift toward specialized farming systems (Buttel, 1990:128). Mechanical innovations in farm practices have also allowed farmers to extend growing seasons, and in some cases – such as with livestock production – to bypass seasonal constraints altogether. Growing the same crop over vast land areas brought about new challenges for farmers, such as increased pest and disease vulnerability. Thus, as mechanization in terms of machinery use has become widespread, so too has the mechanization of soil and pest management. Synthetic fertilizers and pesticides create a “treadmill” effect, as farmers become dependent on external inputs to maintain crop yields (Gliessman, 2015:5). Coinciding with this, farmers – particularly those who farm commodity crops – face a tough market of consistently low prices, as well as a trend of rising farm expenses (Gottwals et al., 2008). The impacts of industrial agriculture are far-reaching and have shown to negatively affect economic, political, social, and environmental aspects of communities (Gliessman, 2015:7).

This farming model is bolstered by the U.S. Farm Bill, a roughly 300-page overarching document that addresses food and agriculture on a national scale. Federal subsidies distributed through Farm Bill programs highly favor grain production and promote overproduction of these cash crops. With

80 percent of federal subsidies going to grain production and only 5 percent to vegetables, domestic markets are flooded with wheat-, corn-, and soy-based products (Congresswoman Chellie Pingree, 2016). These goods are often processed and packaged before reaching the consumer, and are high in calories, saturated fat, and refined sugars. Additionally, studies have found that healthier diets that are high in fruits and vegetables are *less* affordable than diets consisting of fast and processed foods, costing at least US\$1.50 more per day, per person (Rao et al., 2013)¹. Overconsumption of these nutritionally deficient 'food-like' products has contributed to the country's high obesity rates, with marginalized ethnic groups constituting the majority of the overweight and obese demographic (Yeatman, 1994; CDC, 2016).

This well-documented obesity trend often coincides with a lack of food security and access to healthy foods – e.g. fresh produce – particularly in urban and rural areas, and particularly among African-American and Hispanic populations (CDC, 2016; FRAC, 2015). Low-income communities especially often lack options for healthy eating. Frequently, these areas – referred to as 'food deserts,' 'food swamps,' or 'low-access' – provide nothing more than convenience stores or gas stations, wherein the only food selections come in the forms of sugar-sweetened beverages and heavily processed 'junk foods.' Food insecurity affects 14 percent of households in the U.S., or 48.1 million Americans (Feeding America, 2016b). However, not all who are considered food insecure are eligible for federal food assistance programs. Recent research indicates that a national average of 26 percent of those considered food insecure earn incomes that put them above the threshold for government food aid (*ibid*).

With no national food policy in the U.S., food, agriculture, and food assistance are addressed among various governmental bodies and hundreds of programs, all of which fall under the umbrella of the Farm Bill. Grants and assistance from the federal government often do not manifest uniformly at the local government level. One example is the school breakfast program and summer meals program for primary and secondary school students. While the federal government provides each state with funds to provide free and reduced-price breakfasts and summer meals, it is up to each state and even each municipality's school administrators whether or not to make use of these funds (Yeatman, 1994).

In addition, the Farm Bill is rife with contradictions, due in part to its piecemeal framework. Marion Nestle uses the USDA's Dietary Guidelines to illustrate this point. In these guidelines, the USDA emphasizes the importance of fruits and vegetables in a wholesome diet, and in its MyPlate food guide it recommends that at least 50 percent of each meal should be fruits and vegetables (Nestle, 2016; USDA, 2016a). However, the actual funds that subsidize agricultural production do not match the recommendations of these guidelines. Nestle explains:

¹ Henceforth, monetary values will be given in U.S. dollars.

“The 2014 farm bill, although increasing allocations for organic and fruit-and-vegetable production and marketing, still does so at a token level. If you were to create a MyPlate meal that matched where the government historically aimed its subsidies, you’d get a lecture from your doctor. More than three-quarters of your plate would be taken up by a massive corn fritter (80 percent of benefits go to corn, grains and soy oil). You’d have a Dixie cup of milk (dairy gets 3 percent), a hamburger the size of a half dollar (livestock: 2 percent), two peas (fruits and vegetables: 0.45 percent) and an after-dinner cigarette (tobacco: 2 percent). Oh, and a really big linen napkin (cotton: 13 percent) to dab your lips.” (Nestle, 2016; Congresswoman Chellie Pingree, 2016)

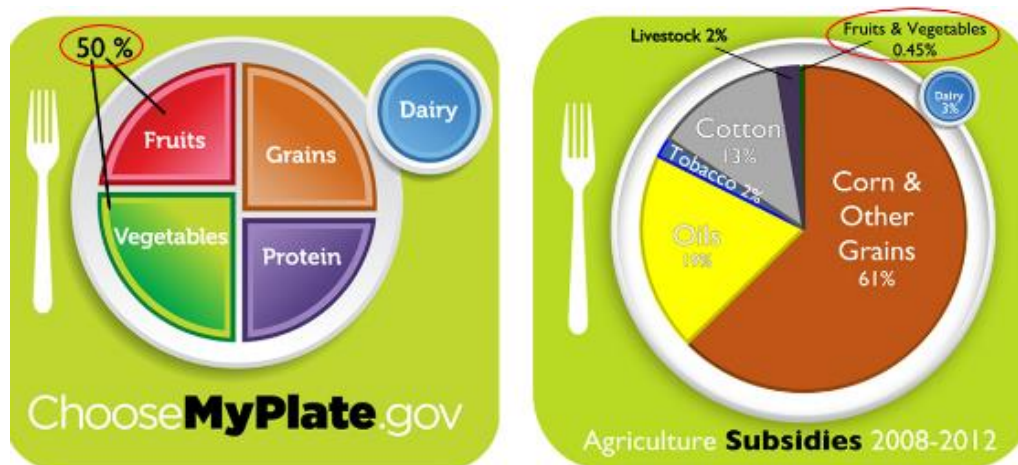


Figure 1: Comparison between government diet recommendations (left) and agriculture subsidies (right)
(source: Congresswoman Chellie Pingree, 2016)

The numerous shortcomings of the U.S. food system play into what Holt-Giménez & Shattuck (2011) refer to as a corporate food regime, which is characterized by “the unprecedented market power and profits of monopoly agrifood corporations, globalized animal protein chains, growing links between food and fuel economies, a ‘supermarket revolution’, liberalized global trade in food, increasingly concentrated land ownership, a shrinking natural resource base, and growing opposition from food movements worldwide” (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011:111). It comes as no surprise, then, that food social movements are growing in number and popularity to address these systemic issues and bring about social change (*ibid*).

Emerging from the back-to-the-land movements in the 1960s and 1970s, these food movements address various shortfalls of the food system (Harper et al., 2009). Some examples include movements of community food security, local food, fair trade, organic agriculture, food justice, food sovereignty, and agroecology.

Given the numerous arms of the global food movement, Holt-Giménez & Shattuck (2011) stress the need for cooperation and coherency across movements to effectively pursue social change within the corporate food regime. The authors use an analytical framework to contextualize and make sense of the numerous movements. They divide the movements into two trends: progressive

and radical. Progressive trends tend to follow a food justice discourse, whereas radical trends often advocate for food sovereignty (*ibid*). The food justice movement has a greater presence in North America, whereas food sovereignty discourse occurs primarily in the global South (Cadieux & Slocum, 2015). Food justice considers food security with social issues, such as underserved communities, class disparities, and institutional racism (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011; Alkon & Norgaard, 2009).² Food justice movements often work to de-commodify humans, viewing them as valuable citizens of democratic societies, rather than consumers who are considered only for their economic value (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011; Levkoe, 2006). Movements responses to the corporate food regime are often decentralized and locally-oriented (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011). Examples of these progressive trend movements include the Slow Food movement, community food security, local food, environmental justice, and fair trade. Radical food movements call for a complete transformation of agriculture and society, and call for a re-negotiation of power relations (*ibid*). Food sovereignty is a term that was coined by the transnational organization, La Via Campesina, who defines it as:

“the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems...It ensures that the rights to use and manage our lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock, and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social classes, and generations” (La Via Campesina, 2007).

Food sovereignty movements focus on the rights of people to define and govern their food systems on their own terms (Ishii-Eiteman, 2009). These movements are characterized by the widespread efforts of La Via Campesina’s peasant advocacy and regional chapters, as well as many rights-based movements (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011).

At the intersection of progressive and radical trends of food movements lies the food policy council movement, and Holt-Giménez & Shattuck (2011) note the potential for these councils to convene the numerous food initiatives under one roof. Food policy councils can function on local, regional, or state levels and address these multi-scalar systems by working to develop comprehensive food policies that are responsive to local needs (Hamilton, 2002). As alluded to by its name, a comprehensive food policy is inherently multisectoral and multidisciplinary, addressing issues along the entire food value chain: food processing, distribution, production, consumption, access, waste, and recycling (Harper et al., 2009; Dahlberg, 1994).

²According the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), “food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO, 2016).

Since the first council was established in Knoxville, Tennessee in 1982, the number of food policy councils has grown to over 200 in North America. The spread of councils has mostly occurred in the U.S. and Canada, but the model is gaining traction in Australia and the United Kingdom. In addition, Wayne Roberts, a Canadian food policy analyst, notes that the majority of councils have only been in operation for less than five years (Roberts, 2016). In their quest to develop comprehensive food policy, councils work to respond to the unique needs and issues of their localities, by convening stakeholders from across the food system (Schiff, 2007; Harper et al., 2009). They often advocate for policies and programs which would improve infrastructure for local food production, preserve farmland, strengthen food security, address environmental issues, and much more (Burgan & Winne, 2012). Food policy councils carve a space for citizen participation and give voice to stakeholders who may have previously been underrepresented or underserved in a community (Harper et al., 2009; Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011). In doing this, Harper et al. contend that councils “have the potential to democratize the food system” (2009).

SETTING THE BOUNDARY: INTRODUCTION OF PRINCE GEORGE’S COUNTY

Prince George’s County is located in the south of the state of Maryland, which is on the east coast of the United States. The county borders Washington, D.C. and has a close relationship with the city, economically, socially, and environmentally. Prince George’s County covers an area of 482.69 square miles, as of 2010 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2016).

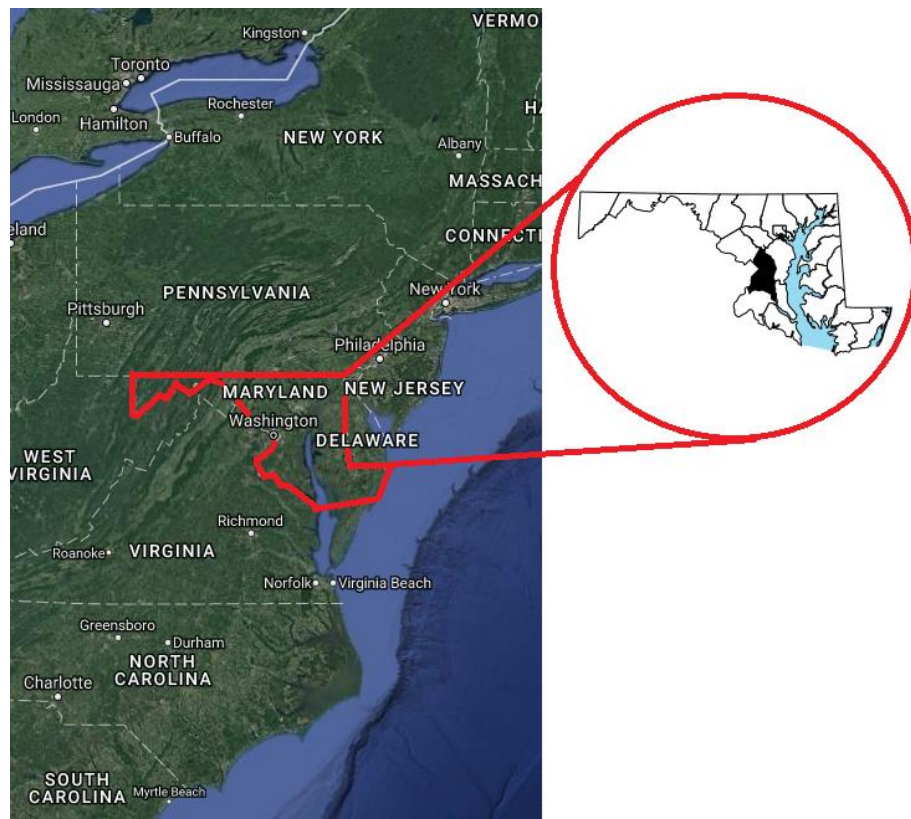


Figure 2: Map of the east coast in the U.S. (left), and demarcation of Prince George’s County in Maryland (right, county is filled in with black). (Sources: left: adaptation from Google Maps, 2016; right: MDOT, 2015)

The county contains rural, suburban, and urban landscapes, and is experiencing an expansion of suburban and urban areas (Gottwals et al., 2008). Southern Maryland is the fastest developing region in the state of Maryland (*ibid*).

Prince George's County is situated within the Chesapeake Bay's watershed, which is the largest, most biologically diverse estuary in the U.S. (Ribaud & Shortle, 2011). Agricultural runoff from the region contributes to the nonpoint source pollution which threatens the integrity of the Bay, as well as point source pollution from factories and sewage treatment facilities (*ibid*).

According to the U.S. government's most recent census data, Prince George's County has a population of 909,535. Of this population, 64.7 percent are African American, 16.9 percent Hispanic or Latino, and 14.2 percent "white" (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2016). Between 2010 and 2014, 85.6 percent of the population was a high school graduate, with 30.4 percent of people age 25 years and older holding a bachelor's degree or higher (*ibid*).

Prince George's County is well connected to Washington, D.C. with numerous Washington Metro subway stations housed in the county's borders, and is well connected to other regions and states via a network of highways. Given its close proximity and connectivity to Washington, D.C. and Baltimore (the capital city of Maryland), the county's businesses enjoy access to one of the wealthiest consumer markets in the nation. The county itself is relatively wealthy, compared to national averages (Gottwals et al., 2008).

The county's median value of owner-occupied housing units between 2010 and 2014 was \$258,800, compared to the national average of \$175,700 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2016). The median household income between 2010 and 2014 was \$73,856, compared to the national average of \$53,482 for the same time period (*ibid*).

Despite the above average household income, 15.5 percent of the county's population – or 137,350 people – is considered food insecure (Feeding America, 2016a). Of this food insecure population, 40 percent earn an income that is higher than the 200 percent poverty level, which disqualifies them from federal food assistance and nutrition programs, such as SNAP. In other words, only 60 percent of Prince George's County's food insecure persons qualify for federal food assistance, while the remaining 40 percent earn too much money.

In line with the nationwide issue of food access, many residents of Prince George's County – particularly residents of low-income communities – have trouble obtaining healthful, affordable, and culturally-appropriate food on a regular basis (PG County Planning Department, 2015). A 2015 food system assessment of the county found that a lack of supermarkets is not an issue; rather, it is the "spatial distribution of them and the quality and price of products they carry that create inequity in accessing healthy food" (PG County Planning Department, 2015). The assessment found that residents often had to travel long distances to obtain higher quality, affordable food (*ibid*).

At the same time, Prince George’s County has an obesity rate of 32 percent, which continues to increase (PG County Planning Department, 2015). This is slightly higher than the overall rate of obesity in the state of Maryland is 27 percent, but lower than the national average of 36.5 percent (Johns Hopkins CLF, 2014; CDC, 2016). The aforementioned food system assessment points to an inequitable access to affordable, healthy foods and a lack of nutrition education as factors influencing the growing rates of obesity and diet-related diseases in the county (PG County Planning Department, 2015).

Southern Maryland – within which Prince George’s County is situated – has gone through a significant agricultural transition in the last 20 years. This transition can be attributed to the Tobacco Buyout program, an initiative which was financially supported by the Master Settlement Agreement (SMADC, 2012). Prior to 1998, tobacco was a significant commodity crop for the Southern Maryland region and had been cultivated in the area since the 17th century (PG County Planning Department, 2005; Gottwals et al., 2008). The Master Settlement Agreement became effective in 1998 and was negotiated between U.S. attorney generals and major tobacco companies as a way to hold these companies accountable for the health costs incurred by the tobacco industry (NAAG, 2007). Maryland received a 25-year share from the agreement, which it funneled into a Cigarette Restitution Fund. The Tobacco Buyout program was one initiative of this fund³, seeking to incentivize farmers to transition from tobacco production to alternative crops (SMADC, 2012). The program was voluntary. However, once enrolled, participants were required to completely stop growing tobacco and were to remain in agricultural production for at least 10 years. Farmers were compensated with \$1.00 per pound of tobacco, based on documented sales from years 1996-1998. As a result of the voluntary program, about 94 percent of Southern Maryland’s tobacco producers – who supplied 7.8 million pounds of tobacco – left the tobacco business forever, either transitioning to different crops or leaving agriculture altogether (following the conclusion of the 10-year stipulation) (*ibid*).

As tobacco was a main commodity crop in Southern Maryland, the region’s agricultural industry took a heavy economic hit. USDA census reports show a 38 percent drop in agricultural sales in the Southern Maryland region (SMADC, 2014). The Southern Maryland Agricultural Development Commission (henceforth referred to as SMADC) was established to address the goal of transitioning the region’s agriculture toward alternative crops. In searching for viable alternatives, the commission saw the rapid, nationwide spread of the local food movement as an opportunity for Southern Maryland’s producers and consumers. According to a 2014 report published by SMADC, “the value of agricultural products sold directly to individuals for human consumption grew 58 percent” between 2007 and 2012 (SMADC, 2014). SMADC launched

³ According to the Maryland Government, the overarching goal of the Cigarette Restitution Fund Program “is to implement strategies to reduce the burden of tobacco related disease in Maryland, with a specific emphasis on tobacco use prevention and cessation programs, cancer prevention, education, and screening programs, cancer research programs, and a strong statewide network of cancer and tobacco local community health coalitions” (Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, *Cigarette Restitution Fund Program*).

several initiatives geared towards promoting and bolstering direct-to-consumer sales, agritourism, and production of value-added items. In Prince George's County, there are six agritourism operations and 33 farms selling locally⁴, five of which are USDA certified organic (Johns Hopkins CLF, 2014). In 2013, there were 19 farmers markets (*ibid*).

As of 2014, Prince George's County has a total of 375 farms – almost 3 percent of Maryland's total – with an average farm size of 99 acres. The county has seven farms which are certified organic by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and four farms are in the process of transitioning to organic (Johns Hopkins CLF, 2014). The top agricultural products cultivated in the county include poultry; beef cattle; grain crops, such as soybeans, wheat, and corn; and vegetables (PG County Planning Department, 2005; Johns Hopkins CLF, 2014). However, most farmers do not grow vegetables because these crops are not supported by the U.S. government's subsidy programs, unlike grain production (PG County Planning Department, 2005). Farmers in Prince George's County are affected by the price fluctuations of global commodity markets, and much like the rest of American farmers, they are pressured to consolidate farmland and strive for economies of scale so that their production can be economically viable (Gottwals et al., 2008).

Similar to other densely populated areas in the U.S., Prince George's County is experiencing a surge in urban agriculture, e.g. community gardens, school gardens, and demonstration gardens. Because the urban agriculture movement is relatively recent in the county, there are still zoning and other policy barriers to its implementation (PG County Planning Department, 2012)⁵.

Coinciding with the national trend of a 'greying' farmer population, the average age of farmers in the county is 59 years. However, the number of younger people developing small-scale farms in the county is growing (PG County Planning Department, 2005). Female farmers constitute 22 percent of the total (Johns Hopkins CLF, 2014; Gottwals et al., 2008). Economically, most farms – 344 total – qualify as small; meaning, the market value of the farm is less than \$50,000. The county contains no concentrated animal feeding operations. Only four farms in the county are considered large, with a market value of \$500,000 or higher. The average market value of a farm in the county is \$49,652, while the state of Maryland's average is \$142,987. In total, Prince George's County's agricultural products sold make up 1 percent of the total market value of Maryland's agriculture (*ibid*).

⁴ Local sales include farmers markets, CSAs, and direct-to-consumer sales

⁵ Zoning refers to government regulations for land use, falling under local jurisdictions. These regulations usually divide the land based on usage zones. For example, a residential zone may only allow for the development of specific housing structures, while a commercial zone may only be used for commercial or industrial purposes. Zoning ordinances can also provide other land use regulations, such as rules for having (or not having) animals in zones, and dimensional requirements of buildings and lots (UW-Eau Claire, *What is Zoning?*).

While it contains 78 food processing facilities, the county – and Southern Maryland in general – does not have a food hub⁶ (Johns Hopkins CLF, 2014).

Finally, given its close proximity to the major metropolitan Washington, D.C. area, farmland to Prince George’s County and the Southern Maryland region is consistently threatened by expanding urban and suburban development (PG County Planning Department, 2005). Assessments of the region indicate that the value of farmland in Prince George’s County is increasing, while the value of agricultural products is declining (*ibid*).

LITERATURE REVIEW OF LOCAL FOOD POLICY COUNCILS

WHAT IS A FOOD POLICY COUNCIL AND WHAT DO THEY DO?

A food policy council is considered as an alternative, coordinated approach to disconnected, industrialized food systems controlled by agribusinesses, seeking instead to promote the benefits of a localized food value chain and enhance local food security (Purifoy, 2014; Burgan & Winne, 2012). At its core, the local food policy council model converges the various arms of the food movement to systemically discuss and address food- and agriculture-related issues within local communities⁷. Food policy councils often address systemic shortfalls through policy objectives and advising (Hamilton, 2002), but many councils also work to improve food systems through more tangible means, i.e. implementing policies through programs (Burgan & Winne, 2012). According to Harper et al. (2009) and Hamilton (2002), ideal FPCs include actors from all sectors of the food system, including production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste management. As such, FPCs are composed of a diverse group of stakeholders and interests, such as government officials, consumers, anti-hunger organizations, community nonprofit organizations, labor organizations, emergency food providers, farmers, environmentalists, food businesses, food-processing industry representatives, universities, and extension offices (Harper et al., 2009; Hamilton, 2002; Burgan & Winne, 2012).

Borron (2003) posits out that a council with a diversity of stakeholders – or a wide-ranging representation of actors in the local community – is likely to take a broader food systems approach. A diversity of stakeholders increases the likelihood that policy activities of a FPC will address the needs of the community (Burgan & Winne, 2012). Furthermore, councils are able to work from the bottom up and carve a space for people to influence policy who normally would not have been

⁶ As defined by the National Good Food Network Food Hub Collaboration, a food hub is “a business or organization that actively manages the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of source-identified products primarily from local and regional producers for the purpose of strengthening producer capacity and their access to whole, retail, and institutional markets. Source identified means that, to some extent, the stories of the food, the producer, the production methods – or simply the location – stay with the product. One distinguishing characteristic of a food hub compared with a conventional produce wholesaler is intent. By design, many food hubs have a mission to strengthen local producers’ capacity and increase their access to markets” (NGFN Food Hub Collaboration, 2014).

⁷ For this thesis research, the scale of ‘local’ includes cities and counties, but not states.

included in the conversation, and in this way can mobilize grassroots communication and civic action (Hamilton, 2002; Burgan & Winne, 2012). Several authors note that FPCs uniquely connect community actors who otherwise would not have interacted. In this sense, Harper et al. (2009) and Schiff (2007) explain that councils have the ability to join fragmented approaches to food system issues, under one roof. Similarly, Purifoy (2014) suggests that FPCs carry the potential to integrate not only food-related issues, but can merge actors, initiatives, and objectives from environmental justice and food justice movements⁸. However, Dahlberg et al. (1997) and Harper et al. (2009) note that this diversity can be both an advantage and a challenge: more voices at the table can also mean that there are more individual agendas that stakeholders hope to develop through an FPC's operations. Yeatman (1994) observes that some FPCs tend to focus on specific issues or sectors within the local food system, such as hunger. Dahlberg et al. (1997) adds that the composition of a council can influence the types of policy and program activities of an FPC. For example, a council with more representation from anti-hunger organizations may tend to focus on policies which improve food security.

Given the diverse demographic of FPC members, Schiff (2007) explains that councils are able to fulfill roles as community networkers and facilitators. FPCs cultivate relationships with and between community stakeholders, such as government bodies, civilians, businesses, and nonprofit organizations. In addition, a council can facilitate the implementation of policies with community organizations, and Schiff (2008) notes that "one role that members may play is in bringing the interests and activities of the FPC to their own constituencies for implementation or to help these ideas 'come alive.'" She adds that networking and facilitating are necessary for an FPC's survival (*ibid.*). Burgan & Winne (2012) notes that the networks fostered in the FPC can be tapped into to implement programs that were created from policy victories. For example, a council member may have professional involvement with an organization that would be an appropriate incubator for a program.

The literature that covers FPCs agrees that a main purpose of a council is to identify and recommend innovative food system policies, while some FPCs also adopt a programmatic focus, geared towards the implementation of policies. It is important to emphasize that the FPCs do not have the power to create policy. Rather, they influence policy and policymakers through an advisory capacity (Burgan & Winne, 2012). The following is an exhaustive list of examples of FPC activities:

⁸ Similar to the ideologies and discourse of the food justice movement, "environmental justice refers to equity in the distribution of environmental benefits and in the prevention and reduction of environmental burdens across all communities" (Purifoy, 2014).

Policy Activities	Program Activities
Reform zoning ordinances to favor local economic development and urban agriculture (Harper et al., 2009; Burgan & Winne, 2012)	Host conferences and events, such as documentary screenings or World Food Day activities (Schiff, 2008; Burgan & Winne, 2012; Schiff, 2007)
Food system assessments (Harper et al., 2009; Schiff, 2007; Hamilton, 2002)	Create school breakfast programs (Burgan & Winne, 2012)
Advocate for policies which promote farmland preservation (Hamilton, 2002; Burgan & Winne, 2012)	Establishing farmer's markets or adding EBT machines (for SNAP ⁹ recipients) to existing farmer's markets (Schiff, 2007; Burgan & Winne, 2012) ¹⁰
Encourage local governments to develop food charters (Harper et al., 2009; Schiff, 2007)	Buy local campaigns (Schiff, 2007)
Publish research and reports aimed at educating policymakers and community citizens (Schiff, 2007; Borron, 2003)	Conduct feasibility and food access studies within the local food system (Schiff, 2007; Harper et al., 2009)
Advocate for policies at the state and national levels (Harper et al 2009; Borron 2003)	Establish community and school gardens (Schiff, 2007)
Advocate for local procurement of food for school meals (Hamilton, 2002; Burgan & Winne, 2012)	Improve transportation routes to strengthen food access (Schiff, 2007; Harper et al., 2009)
Advocate for and monitor legislation which improves access and participation of food assistance programs, such as SNAP (Harper et al., 2009)	Providing or improving access to extension services for farmers (Schiff, 2007)

Table 1: Policy and program activities of food policy councils

Results from a study conducted by Schiff (2008) indicate that there is a broad spectrum of policy versus programmatic foci in FPCs. In the study, Schiff found that some councils concentrated heavily on program development and implementation of policy innovations, shying away from direct engagement in policy advocacy. Other councils, however, exist mainly to act as a voice for

⁹ SNAP, or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as the Food Stamp Program), is a federal food aid program which is part of the U.S. Farm Bill. The program provides debit cards – to be used for food – to Americans who meet low-income qualifications.

¹⁰ EBT, or Electronic Benefit Transfer, is an electronic system which allows for welfare/food assistance benefits to be issued through a payment card.

its multi-stakeholder constituency in the lawmaking arena, pushing for policy developments and amendments that are perceived to benefit their local food system.

As indicated in Table 1, the work of FPCs does not exclusively affect food-related topics. For example, Harper et al. (2009) and Burgan & Winne (2012) writes that local economic development, improved public health, and poverty alleviation can be peripheral aims or byproducts of the policy and program activities that FPCs engage in.

Because of its capacity to integrate stakeholders from all parts of the food value chain, the FPC model is often touted as a democratic approach to food system issues. As described by Harper et al. (2009), this “convergence in diversity” provides a conducive environment for social learning, which Harper et al. (2009) argues is the foundation for social change. Schiff (2008) agrees that the diversity within FPCs cultivates social learning, both internally and externally to the councils. Schiff (2008) and Borron (2003) highlights the role of FPCs as educators, as well as the FPC model as a milieu for knowledge exchange. Externally, FPCs can provide governments with insight about the interlinkages between policies and the health of food systems, an insight which is often missing in local government operations. In addition, Schiff (2008) notes that FPCs can use their networks to disseminate educational materials and research publications to a wider audience, in the areas of nutrition education, equitable food systems, sustainable farming, and the relationship between food and economic development (Burgan & Winne, 2012).

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF FOOD POLICY COUNCILS

FPCs can be housed within a government office or can be formed by independent organizations, i.e. nonprofit organizations and grassroots networks (Harper et al, 2009; Borron, 2003; Hamilton, 2002; Burgan & Winne, 2012). Schiff (2008) explains that many earlier FPCs were based in and closely connected to local governments. Harper et al. (2009) and Burgan & Winne (2012) note that, nowadays, most FPCs at the local and county levels are independent of government. FPC literature highlights the advantages and challenges of both affiliations. Councils that are housed as part of a government agency can enjoy a reliable source of funding, whereas funding can be more of an uncertainty with councils that function independently from the government (Harper et al., 2009). However, Harper et al. (2009) observes that FPCs formed by nonprofit organizations can enjoy access to foundation funding. In terms of funding, Harper et al. (2009) also notes that these FPCs tend to be part of local and regional networks of nonprofit relationships, which can be advantageous for finding funding sources.

Hamilton (2002) and Harper et al. (2009) highlight staff and funding as two challenges that many FPCs face, especially in the early years of a council’s existence. These two factors play a significant role in the degree of policy activity an FPC engages in (Hamilton, 2002). However, Burgan & Winne (2012) identifies staffing as a challenge which is felt more by nongovernmental FPCs, while the government-affiliated FPCs tend to enjoy the benefits of government staff and access to a variety of departments.

According to Schiff (2008) and Burgan & Winne (2012), a primary activity of FPCs is to make policy recommendations, regardless of government versus non-government affiliation. Some authors posit that FPCs housed within the government can have stronger support to implement policies and programs (Schiff, 2008), but may not have as much leeway to openly criticize governmental policies and actions (Borron, 2003). In addition, Harper et al. (2009:38) notes that FPCs housed within governments are susceptible to the “shifting sands of politics and can become inactive or even disappear when political leaders change.” Burgan & Winne (2012:13) describes a similar sentiment, saying that government-affiliated FPCs are likely to feel the effects of “bureaucratic inefficiencies”. Schiff’s (2008) study indicates varying opinions about the efficacy of government-affiliated FPCs: some interviewees maintain that an association with local government can enhance legitimacy of a council, while others observe that this same association could garner mistrust from community members and organizations. In this sense, whether a government affiliation is beneficial or disadvantageous to an FPC can depend on the local context.

The literature highlights the importance of the first few years of a council’s existence in determining the direction the FPC will take. Burgan & Winne (2012) explains that successful councils must spend the beginning years establishing common values and missions. This can be accomplished by conducting a community food system assessment, which can help a council to understand the context within which it is working and to determine the needs of the locality. From the community food system assessment, a council may then be better equipped to develop strategy and action plans (Burgan & Winne, 2012). This process of generating common goals, strategies, and action plans is referred to by Burgan & Winne (2012:22-23) as strategic planning, which they define as “a process that helps members of a group clarify their thinking about the group’s overall purpose, the results it hopes to achieve, and how to achieve them”. From these initial strategic planning sessions, a council will often create groups or subcommittees which focus on specific aspects of the organization’s visions and strategies (Burgan & Winne, 2012; Harper et al., 2009). For example, one working group may focus on addressing community youth engagement, while another working group may focus on local food production. Harper et al. (2009) adds that some councils may create steering committees, chairs, or executives to address decision-making, but these do not necessarily ensure a successful council.

According to a nationwide study conducted by Harper et al. (2009:3), 14 percent of councils at the county level appoint their members, while the rest of the councils are evenly split between “self-selection, election/nomination and application”. At the local level, self-selection accounts for more than 50 percent of councils, while 36 percent are appointed and 10 percent require that members submit an application (Harper et al., 2009). As stated earlier, the literature indicates that an FPC’s work and outcomes tend to be influenced by the diversity of council members. As such, Burgan & Winne (2012) highlights the importance of keeping this in mind when recruiting new members, and that councils should focus on taking in people with different viewpoints and priorities. Harper et al. (2009) mentions that this is easier said than done, highlighting the challenge that many FPCs have with including all sectors of food supply chains in their membership.

As stated in the previous section, a lack of staff can impede the momentum of policy advocacy. Staff are useful for FPCs because they can free council members from time-consuming administrative tasks, such as record keeping and facilitating meetings (Harper et al., 2009). According to Harper et al. (2009), most FPCs tend to be unstaffed or have only one part-time staff member. As a result, councils are often forced to rely on volunteers and members for conducting administrative duties necessary to keep an FPC moving forward.

INTRODUCTION OF MOTIVATIONS, AIMS, AND RESEARCH QUESTION

Agroecology as a movement was first recognized by Wezel et al. (2009). The movement is present in varying degrees around the world, and works to scale up the adoption of agroecological practices. It is unique in that it is often adopted by other food movements as a guiding framework or tool for development (Fernandez et al., 2013; Rosset & Martinez-Torres, 2012). Agroecology as a social movement shows up in literature with greater frequency, but rarely brings in concepts from social movements. At the same time, agroecology is evolving in relation to its position in current global affairs, and numerous scholars, practitioners, and organizations are calling for the scaling up of agroecology, e.g. United Nations Special Rapporteurs on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter and Hilal Elver. Furthermore, academics posit that agroecology can intertwine with other like-minded movements to enable systemic policy changes (Fernandez et al., 2013). From this perspective, I undertook this thesis research to gain a clearer understanding of the identity of agroecology as a movement. I sought to do this by examining the relationship of food policy councils and agroecology, using discourse from social movement research.

My aims for this thesis study are as follows:

- To determine possible principles of agroecology movements, set by the parameters of a literature review.
- To explore the hypothetical relationship between agroecological social movements and social movement organizations.
- To understand the relationship of agroecology to food policy councils, based on principles determined by my literature review.

From these aims, I have constructed my overarching research question:

Have food policy councils (FPCs) adopted principles of agroecology movements? If yes, how do they manifest in FPCs? If no, why not?

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

RESEARCH PARADIGM

To answer the research question, I have chosen to undertake a case study of the Prince George's County Food Equity Council in Maryland, United States. I chose this particular case because, while the county is unique in some regards, in many ways it embodies the numerous plights of the U.S.

food system: high rates of diet-related illnesses; prevalent food insecurity; threatened farmland; and fragmented food policies, to name a few. As a native of the Maryland and Virginia areas, I would be remiss not to mention that the case also evokes a strong personal interest, and that I had the advantage of coming into the study with some understanding of the regional context.

The use of case study was applied as an overarching methodology, because it enables a deep exploration of one particular phenomena, or case, which can then be related back to a larger picture or class of similar phenomena (Vennesson, 2008). In addition, case study was relevant for my research because of its ability to answer “how” and “why” questions (Yin, 2014:30). While case study methodology allows for the coexistence of a positivist and interpretivist approach, I adopted the latter (Vennesson, 2008; Yin, 2014:17). Interpretivism functions under the premise that social science is inherently different from natural sciences, and as such should assume research methods and methodologies which separate social realms from the natural world (Bryman, 2012:28).

Inherent to case study methodology is the necessity of creating boundaries for the case, or ‘casing’ (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Vennesson, 2008). Boundary construction was also aided by determining the type of case study design used. The holistic single-case study design, described by Yin, is relevant for my study (2014:49-56). A holistic approach to a single-case study entails examining one case in its entirety, rather than an embedded approach, which examines a specific element or process within a case (*ibid*).

The heart of the case focused on the Prince George’s County Food Equity Council (hereafter referred to as the FEC) as an organization. However, I view the FEC case as more than just the aggregation of members, meetings, and policy activities. By adopting a systems approach, I could examine the interactions of physical and abstract components to gain an understanding and appreciation for the complexity of the FEC (Checkland, 1986:101; Bawden, 1991). Systems researchers contend that this holistic study of interrelationships between system components would allow me to identify emergent properties (Bawden, 1991). In the case of the FEC, I considered components such as the internal and external activities of the council, i.e. organizational structure; membership dynamics and demographic; interactions with county policymakers; relationships with community actors in the county; and interactions with partners and networks that are spread throughout the state of Maryland. As the FEC is nested within and heavily influenced by the geopolitical boundaries of Prince George’s County, the case also considered a county-level context. When relevant, the case will consider the context of the Southern Maryland region.

As will be further explained in the following section describing my methods for data collection and analysis, I extracted key principles of agroecology from a preliminary literature review. As case study methodology allows for the researcher to generate and refine hypotheses (also referred to as ‘propositions’ in literature), this case can also serve to examine the efficacy of these principles (Yin, 2014:30; Vennesson, 2008). These hypotheses – or principles in my case – facilitate the development of a conceptual framework. In this way, I was able to specify the boundaries of my study, which was helpful in assuring that I remained focused on my research question (Miles &

Huberman, 1994:18). Miles & Huberman maintain that a conceptual framework can be seen as a map for the researcher, a map which can be improved and built upon as empirical knowledge accumulates (1994:20-21). Case study methodology proves its inductive possibilities in that these hypotheses and framework can be altered or built upon in response to emerging evidence from the case (Vennesson, 2008; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

In addition to case study methodology, this thesis functions within a constructivist paradigm. This paradigm questions the existence of reality, but posits that reality is constructed by social actors who are constantly developing and negotiating subjective explanations for reality (Bryman, 2012:33-34). It views social reality as “an ongoing accomplishment of social actors rather than something external to them and that totally constrains them” (Bryman, 2012:34). Constructivism also recognizes that the researcher, while striving for objectivity, inevitably carries his or her own assumptions and accounts of social phenomena (*ibid*).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: LITERATURE REVIEW OF AGROECOLOGY

In line with the iterative and reflective nature of the qualitative research methods used in this thesis, the literature review of agroecology was mainly conducted prior to fieldwork but continued throughout the data collection period. The main principles and conceptual framework derived from literature were uncovered before fieldwork and were used to guide the research project, but these principles were refined and fine-tuned as data from the field led me to dig deeper into certain themes in the literature of agroecology. The literature considered for this review were pulled from databases and libraries through the SLU network. More than 60 articles and books were reviewed and the resulting report, below, summarizes the key themes that were present in the literature. Due to availability of texts, I only considered literature from the 1980s to present. In addition, conflicting views which are drastically different from these themes are mentioned. As described by Baumeister & Leary, the following narrative literature review allowed me to “link together many studies on different topics, either for purposes of reinterpretation or interconnection” (Baumeister & Leary, 1997:312)

Wezel et al. (2009) suggest that agroecology can be considered as a scientific discipline, movement, and practice. The following literature review is structured based on these three divisions. Agroecology as a science investigates the interaction of ecological principles with agriculture (Wezel et al., 2009; Gliessman, 2015:18). As a practice, agroecology works on the ground to implement various sources of knowledge – e.g. traditional knowledge and knowledge from natural sciences – in production systems (*ibid*). Lastly, in bringing agroecology to a larger scale, scholars are expanding the role of agroecology to include the social restructuring of food systems (Wezel et al., 2009; Gliessman, 2015:18; Rosset, 2015). It is important to note that these three manifestations of agroecology are often intertwined. For example, in countries where agroecology is prevalent in movement form, there is often a presence of the practice as well (particularly in Brazil) (Wezel et al., 2009). Through its food systems approach, which, I posit, integrates principles of inclusion and community orientation, agroecology works to maximize the long-term benefits of food systems,

through the development and maintenance of resilience¹¹ and equity¹². Scholars within the field of agroecology tout these systems as a viable alternative to industrial, large-scale agriculture, which is dependent on large amounts of external inputs – e.g. chemical pesticides and herbicides, seeds, and machineries (Gliessman, 2015:4).

As a practice, agroecology entails the technical application of principles derived from the science of agroecology, as well as the incorporation of indigenous, traditional practices and knowledge (Wezel et al., 2009; Gliessman, 2015:209,288). In this context, it champions farming systems that mimic ecological processes in a way that minimizes external inputs; promotes biodiversity, soil fertility, and circular/closed loop systems; considers nutrient cycling and energy flows; and values practices which draw from local resources (Altieri & Nicholls, 2005; Gliessman, 2015:26). As explained by Altieri (1995), the dominant paradigm of traditional agricultural research tends to offer prescriptions to individual symptoms or problems on the farm, without taking into account the interacting components of a system (e.g., addressing a pest infestation when it arises, rather than understanding what caused this change). In contrast, agroecology highlights the need to understand the balances and imbalances of a system, as well as the complexity and interconnectedness of system components (Vandermeer, 1995; Altieri & Nicholls, 2005:30). As such, the knowledge systems are unconventional when compared to natural sciences rooted in positivism, as agroecology places value on a diversity of knowledge sources: traditional, local, indigenous, positivist, and interdisciplinary (Buttel, 2003; Dalgaard et al., 2003). Altieri (1995) posits that understanding the dynamism of these system components and their interactions can lead to the development of equiposed agroecosystems. According to Altieri & Nicholls (2005:203),

“The ultimate goal of agroecological design is to integrate components so that overall biological efficiency is improved, biodiversity is preserved, and the agroecosystem productivity and its self-sustaining capacity is maintained. The goal is to design a quilt of agroecosystems within a landscape unit, each mimicking the structure and function of natural ecosystems.”

Some approaches to agroecology as a discipline focus on natural sciences and field, farm, and landscape levels of food systems (Wezel et al., 2009; Buttel, 2003; Mendez et al., 2013). These approaches were predominant in texts prior to the 1990s and to some extent are still present today.

¹¹ Resilience is defined as “the capacity of a system, be it an individual, a forest, a city or an economy, to deal with change and continue to develop. It is about how humans and nature can use shocks and disturbances like a financial crisis or climate change to spur renewal and innovative thinking” (Stockholm Resilience Centre, *What is resilience?*). Resilient systems are adaptable (*ibid*). According to Mendez et al. (2013), an adaptable system uses strategies “that can be adjusted and reevaluated through time.”

¹² In the context of this research, the following definition is applied: “Equity derives from a concept of social justice. It represents a belief that there are some things which people should have, that there are basic needs that should be fulfilled, that burdens and rewards should not be spread too divergently across the community, and that policy should be directed with impartiality, fairness and justice towards these ends” (Falk et al., 1993:2).

In the last few decades, these scientific approaches have been criticized by authors for their general negligence of political, economic, social, and cultural effects, interlinkages, and issues in analyzing and addressing wider food systems (Buttel, 2003; Mendez et al., 2013). Agroecology as a science has addressed this criticism by scaling up to adopt a broad and interdisciplinary food systems approach (Wezel et al., 2009; Dalgaard et al., 2003). In part, this is because of researchers' conviction that, in order for agroecological practices and principles to be realized at the farm level, there must be systemic support in a wider framework (Thrupp et al., 2015). Francis et al (2003:100) develop upon previous definitions of agroecology, to explain that it is an "integrative study of the ecology of the entire food system, encompassing ecological, economic, and social dimensions." A broader perspective can accomplish systemic food security and equity, which are necessary for the realization of an overarching goal of sustainable societies (Francis et al., 2003; Tomich et al., 2011). Tomich et al. (2011) notes that agricultural production is intrinsically linked to wider, global environmental challenges; to address this relationship, the scale of agroecology must range from the molecular level to the global. Given the systemic nature of food policy councils, this food systems approach of agroecology is used to contextualize the following results and discussion sections. This is because a wider lens allows the researcher to appreciate and better apply Wezel et al.'s (2009) concept of agroecology as a science, movement, and practice, which will be discussed further along in this literature review (Timmermann & Félix, 2015).

For example, Timmermann & Félix (2015) uses the resource of labor to show the socioeconomic implications of restructuring farms to practice agroecological techniques. At present, mechanization and specialization dominant in much of the world's agriculture have catalyzed a de-skilling of farm laborers and farmers alike, with traditional knowledge replaced by specific, technical knowledge of pesticide and fertilizer inputs and machinery. As an inherently knowledge-intensive paradigm (Altieri & Toledo, 2011), agroecology requires a completely different set of knowledge and skills, which thrives on the collaboration between farmers, farm workers, and community members, to create innovations and inventive solutions (Timmermann & Félix, 2015; Tomich et al., 2011). Timmermann & Félix (2015) posits that agroecological farms necessarily involve higher quantities of manual labor, which could send a wave of effects through the food system: increased employment opportunities; possibilities for rural development; and the potential to enlist more youth in farming.

In adopting a food systems approach, a blurring of lines is observed in the literature when discussing science and practice and the overlap between the two (Wezel et al., 2009; Wezel & Soldat, 2009). The perceived reason for this is because of agroecology's unique methods and values related to knowledge innovation and dissemination. In general, the authors of the literature included in this review eschew a top-down research and development approach, valuing instead diverse sources of knowledge generation and transfer, such as participatory research, interdisciplinary research, and horizontal knowledge exchange (Dalgaard et al., 2003). A cornerstone of agroecology is the assertion that food systems must be examined on a case-by-case basis. This invokes a principle of inclusivity of all food system actors, as it is posited that these actors are best able to

address the unique facets and problems of their communities (Mendez et al., 2013; Francis et al., 2003). Francis et al. (2003) and Tomich et al. (2011) explain that a food system must include a diversity of community actors if it is to achieve its goals of resilience. Also present in the discourse of inclusivity is the contention that an involvement of a diversity of actors tends to generate creative solutions and developments (Buttel, 2003).

The value of community also plays an integral role in the discourse, knowledge generation, and approaches of the food systems perspective of agroecology (Dalgaard et al., 2001). In this context, community orientation celebrates community agency as a driving force and rallying point for addressing regional food needs (Altieri & Toledo, 2011). This orientation can be characterized by a community's preference for locally procured and indigenous resources and knowledge. Community orientation is inherent to the food systems approach of agroecology, because the approach values a form of ingenuity which makes use of indigenous and locally-available resources, techniques, crops, and knowledge, thus embracing "uniqueness of place" (Francis, 2003; Altieri & Toledo, 2011). Altieri & Toledo (2011) note that this theme of community is bolstered through horizontal knowledge exchange (e.g., farmer-to-farmer research), grassroots extension, community involvement, and community-oriented approaches.

Agroecology in the form of a social movement works to restructure and remove obstacles that impede the adoption of agroecology. The predominant form of agricultural production favors a top-down style of research and extension, and the current food systems are criticized for being dominated by corporate interests (Rosset, 2015; Tomich et al., 2011), cultivating a state of the art which is not conducive to the adoption of agroecological farming practices (Thrupp et al., 2015). In short, multi-scalar social, economic, and political structures must be re-imagined to provide a favorable and viable climate for agroecological farming (Wezel & Soldat, 2009).

When reviewing literature related to agroecology as a movement, it was found that agroecology is employed by social movements as a tool to achieve their goals (Thrupp et al., 2015). Indeed, none of the literature reviewed indicated examples of agroecology movements as standalone phenomena. Rosset & Martinez-Torres (2012) explain that social movements offer agroecology an opportunity for scaling up in a way that deviates from the conventional top-down approach of agricultural research. This is because social movements are able to mobilize a large audience, which can better facilitate innovation generation and dissemination (*ibid*).

According to Wezel et al. (2009), agroecology as a movement is particularly gaining traction in Latin America. For example, Galvão Freire (2015) writes about the women's movement in Paraíba, Brazil, which uses collective learning and agroecology as ways to elevate the social status of women farmers. These women maintain home gardens using agroecological methods, and provide significant contributions to households. Yet, they are susceptible to oppression and violence and Galvão Freire (2015) argues that they are underappreciated in their communities. As such, the full potential of agroecological practices in these contexts cannot be realized without the social equity of these women, according to Galvão Freire (2015). Thus, the women's movement and agroecology

movement are used jointly and serve to mutually benefit each other. Following a regional seminar, the women participants established a Committee for Food and Health, which facilitates horizontal farmer-to-farmer knowledge exchange among the women. Through these exchanges, a network of over 1,300 women “farmer-innovators” developed, working to collectively address site-specific issues of their household gardens and farms (Galvão Freire, 2015). These exchanges fulfilled two key functions: (1) a means to collectively advance, disseminate, and organize the repertoire of agroecological knowledge held by the women, and (2) to forge social ties among the women farmers, who were previously isolated both socially and culturally (*ibid*).

To work within the initiatives of transnational social movements can help agroecology to achieve its overarching goal of maximizing the long-term benefits in food systems (Anderson et al., 2015; Rosset & Martinez-Torres, 2012; Mendez et al., 2013). For example, Rosset & Martinez-Torres (2012) highlight the rural social movements that are organized under the umbrella of the international, nonprofit organization, La Via Campesina. Placing these rural movements under one organizing body serves as a response to transnational, exploitative agribusinesses, and as a means to develop resilient communities (*ibid*). La Via Campesina uses a farmer-to-farmer methodology, or Campesino-a-Campesino (CAC) to revitalize local and indigenous farming knowledge. CAC is a tool that serves not only to streamline the adoption of agroecology, but also to revive peasant cultures and agency in rural areas (*ibid*). One of the main goals of these rural movements is to protect land rights and reclaim land for peasants and family farmers. Rosset & Martinez-Torres (2012) note that agroecology is an appealing approach because these reclaimed lands are often degraded from its former industrial agriculture uses, and in need of alternative practices that can revive the soil and biodiversity. Furthermore, the authors go on to say that agroecological farming is used by La Via Campesina as “a key element in resistance, re-peasantization, and the reconfiguration of territories” (*ibid*).

The collaboration between food sovereignty movements and agroecology has risen to the forefront of the literature and discourse of agroecology as a movement (Anderson et al., 2015). Anderson et al. (2015) concisely defines food sovereignty as “the right of citizens to control food policy and practice.” In this sense, agroecology is touted as a flexible, alternative political framework and tool which can help communities to develop locally-appropriate models and solutions, as well as to achieve food sovereignty (Anderson et al., 2015; Rosset & Martinez-Torres, 2012). The Nyéléni Declaration of 2015 vocalizes the assertion of numerous texts in this literature review: that agroecology can be considered a pillar of food sovereignty, and is thus political in nature. Through this perspective, the Nyéléni Declaration – which is the end product of the International Forum for Agroecology in Nyéléni, Mali – describes the potential and role of agroecology in renegotiating power relations in food systems toward a structure that places control of communities into the hands of its residents (rather than, for example, the hands of corporate interests). As told by Tomich et al. (2011), agroecology is necessarily concerned with power and social relations in a food system because it is directly affected by the decisions made by these forces (e.g., environmental valuation, and the interlinkages of the private sector, public policy, and civil society). Altieri & Toledo (2011)

note that Latin America has especially used agroecology as a political tool to “directly challenge neoliberal modernization policies based on agribusinesses and agroexports while opening new political roads for Latin American agrarian societies” and that “the new agroecological scientific and technological paradigm is being built in constant reciprocity with social movements and political processes.” This is done in part by promoting agroecological principles and farming practices, such as agrobiodiversity, low external inputs, and community self-sufficiency.

Brazil offers a unique example of this politicization of agroecology. Over the last few decades, principles of agroecology have been integrated into state and federal government departments and initiatives (Altieri & Toledo, 2011). For instance, in Belo Horizonte, the government’s Secretariat for Nutrition and Food Security (SMASAN) has worked since 1993 to address citizens’ right to food and food security in the city, using an approach that prioritizes community involvement in decision making (FAO, 2015). Community stakeholders – including government agencies, labor unions, nonprofit organizations, distributors, retailers, consumers, and food producers – work together in a Council for Food Security, which gives input to SMASAN’s programs. A similar forum, called the Urban Agricultural Space, convenes 30 civil society groups and government agencies to create urban agriculture initiatives for the city, such as improved land use codes; developing policies which allow for future development of agriculture in Belo Horizonte; and raising the social standing of urban farmers (*ibid*).

Agroecology in the United States manifests as science, movement, and practice. The science is more prominent, but recently “the research evolved into a scientific discipline and laid a foundation for agroecological movements in supporting sustainability, rural development, and environmental improvement, all of which helped to promote agroecological practices” (Wezel et al., 2009:506-507). Agroecology, or principles of agroecology, has a presence in food social movements in the States, but often it is not explicitly mentioned in movement discourse (Fernandez et al., 2013). Organizations using ‘agroecology’ as a defining term or strategy of their activities include Food First, Pesticide Action Network, Oxfam America, Heifer International, Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, Family Farm Defenders, and the National Family Farm Coalition (*ibid*).

The following diagram was constructed based on key themes and principles derived from the literature review. This diagram will serve as a conceptual framework in reporting results and discussion from the case study of the Prince George’s County Food Equity Council. Inclusivity and community orientation were perceived to be two primary principles of agroecology. For example, when authors of agroecology literature discuss the importance of local procurement of resources, it is perceived that community orientation is behind this. When authors talk about the need for a diverse repertoire of knowledge, it is perceived that inclusivity is behind this. These two main themes were then organized by defining characteristics, such as ‘local procurement’ and ‘horizontal structures and knowledge’ as characteristics of community orientation. It was inferred that the activities of inclusivity and community orientation have somewhat blurred boundaries, thus the model reflects an overlapping of the two. For example, participatory methods are inclusive because they necessarily involve a diversity of actors, and contain characteristics of community

orientation because they necessarily place importance on drawing from locally-generated knowledge (Mendez et al., 2013). The two themes of inclusivity and community orientation are perceived to be a part of an overarching process of innovation, which culminates in a food systems approach. As social movements are driven by end goals and visions, it is gathered from the literature review that the main goal of an agroecology movement is to maximize long-term benefits of a food system (*ibid*). This can then be characterized by a food system that is resilient and equitable. The results and discussion section will emphasize the **process** of the movement, i.e. the themes of inclusivity and community orientation. The food systems approach will be discussed in the context of the data, as deemed relevant. It is important to note that a true food systems approach cannot be reduced to simply the sum of inclusivity and community orientation. As the name implies, this approach invokes systems thinking as a guiding framework and paradigm for managing community food systems. For the purpose of this study, a food systems approach involves the consideration of the complex interlinkages and relationships between all stakeholders and processes in the food value chain, when making management decisions. Less emphasis will be placed on the end goals of this conceptual model, because it is beyond the scope and focus of this study to analyze and classify the Prince George's County food system based on these metrics (resilience and equity).

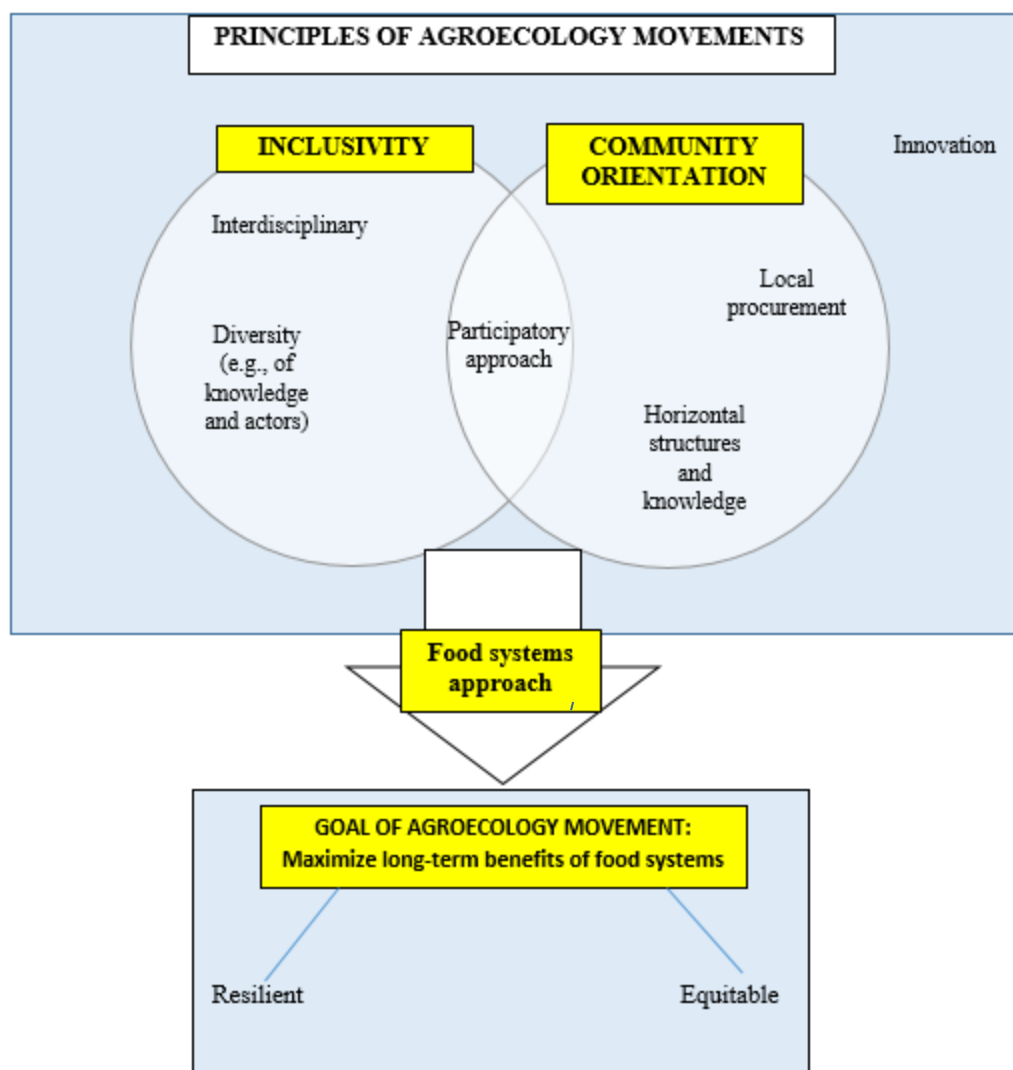


Figure 3: Principles of agroecology movements - conceptual framework

METHODS: DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

NARRATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior to entering the field site, a literature review was conducted in order to determine principles of agroecology and agroecological movements. These principles formed the framework of the main case study, and this framework guided the thematic development of the interview guides and observations, thus narrowing and focusing the scope of the data collection.

A narrative literature review of agroecology was appropriate for this thesis research for gaining comprehensive state-of-the-art insight from previous texts and allowing for the extraction of patterns and connections, as well as providing this researcher's own interpretations of the texts

(Baumeister & Leary, 1997). The literature review relied mainly on internet journals, books, and reports of conference proceedings.

Thus, this preparatory process of literature review and framework development aligns with the boundary-building tenet from case study methodology.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted between 24 February, 2016 and 28 March, 2016. Interviewees are either FEC members or work closely with the FEC in policy activities. My within-case sampling was opportunistic and iterative, in that I pursued new interviewees based on emerging evidence and themes, as well as recommendations from previous interviewees or other FEC members (Kuzel, 1992 and Patton, 1990, see Miles & Huberman, 1994:28-29). The sampling was also purposive, which means that the researcher has an idea of the purpose he or she wants interviewees to serve (Bernard, 2006:189-190). In my case, I had an idea that – often based on recommendations and hearsay from FEC members – certain informants would have a higher likelihood to contain knowledge on a specific issue or theme which I was pursuing. The FEC program director acted as an intermediary who connected to me to prospective interview participants.

During the initial weeks of interviews and observations, I paid close attention when members mentioned specific people who were considered to be particularly knowledgeable or qualified to speak about the council. I did not manage to interview a former FEC member. However, I was able to conduct an interview with a former representative of the county government's Soil Conservation District, which works closely with the FEC in policy activities. I also interviewed the FEC's program director; the FEC's resource advisor, who works within the nonprofit organization that financially supports the council; and FEC members representing government entities, anti-hunger organizations, a local university, and a local policymaker. Names of interviewees are excluded from the results and discussions, and proper nouns of associated organizations were replaced with pseudonyms.

Interview durations varied from 25 minutes to 105 minutes. This was contingent on time availability of the interviewee. Semi-structured interviews were relevant for this research because of their flexibility and adaptability (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009:130). No one interview contained the same questions as the previous interviews. This was because each interview was transcribed and coded immediately in order to pursue themes and points of interest that emerged, in relation to the conceptual framework. Thus, the interviews followed a reflexive process. Given the limited time with each interviewee, a balance had to be struck between maintaining a conversational, casual atmosphere while following the interview guides (Yin, 2014:111).

Particularly with the first four interviews, many of the questions asked were geared towards understanding the organizational structure and functions of the FEC. This was a necessary procedure, as much of this crucial contextual knowledge of the case was not available in documents,

records, or reports. Whilst no interviews were identical, some questions were repeated in every interview in order to corroborate answers/accounts and in order to understand each interviewee's background, role, and relationship to the FEC.

DIRECT OBSERVATION

Seven direct observations were conducted between 3 February, 2016 and 31 March, 2016. Direct observations involve “watching people and recording their behavior on the spot” (Bernard, 2006:413). The observations were conducted at six working group meetings and one full council meeting (with all working groups in attendance). Two observations were conducted for each working group. Each meeting lasted between two to three hours. I did not participate in any of the meetings, but sat quietly at the table and jotted down notes when necessary. These observations allowed me to immerse myself in the council's activities and proceedings, giving me a firsthand account of the realities of the FEC. Direct observations also helped me corroborate information and emerging themes which I picked up from the interviews (Bernard, 2006:344). On the other hand, themes also emerged from observations, which helped to shape interview guides for the later stages of data collection.

Observations were not recorded because: 1) The working group meetings are considered a safe space for FEC members and community citizens to engage in open discussions of the county's food system and policies. Based on the intimacy of the meetings, I felt that overtly recording the proceedings could potentially influence the discourse, reactions, and ‘natural’ atmosphere, and could compromise the feeling of security attached to these meetings, and 2) Out of respect for the anonymity of the members and participants, whose professional careers are sometimes closely aligned with topics covered in the working group meetings.

DOCUMENTS AND ARCHIVAL RECORDS

To supplement and corroborate data retrieved from observations and interviews, documents and archival records were analyzed (Yin, 2014:107). These documents relate to the FEC in that they were either published by the council, authored or co-authored by a council member, and/or contribute to contextual knowledge of the case study. Documents included the following:

- Testimonials from community citizens and the FEC. As the FEC is primarily concerned with policy advocacy, testimonials are frequently presented – orally and on paper – to county legislators at public hearings.
- Internet documents:
 - Social media posts from the FEC's Facebook and Twitter accounts. These include updates on the council's activities, as well as the activities of council members. Other social media posts include news articles related to food systems, calls to action for FEC advocacy initiatives, pictures of the FEC's engagement in community activities, and posts publicizing community events.

- From the FEC's website, there is a section labeled "Outside Resources." These documents provided contextual information for Prince George's County. In addition, information about the county was found from various government websites. Some examples include:
 - "Action alerts," newsletters, "latest news," and press releases. These resources are made publicly available on the FEC's website and provide intel on recent activities and advocacy initiatives that the council both partakes in and endorses/commends. Action alerts also provide readers with contact information and advice, should they wish to provide written testimony to a policymaker, for example.
 - Video documentation of a round table meeting, entitled "Cultivating a Revitalized Local Food System," which took place on February 18, 2016. The round table was a multi-stakeholder meeting of stakeholders in the Prince George's County's food supply chain, e.g. farmers, retailers, and nonprofit organizations. Some of the attendees were also FEC members. The video documentation is publicly available on YouTube.
 - Documents which publicly declare the FEC's stance on particular advocacy topics. One example is the "Evaluation and Recommendations Report Feedback" text, which commends a consulting firm's policy recommendations and provides the FEC's position and perspective in regard to the current zoning ordinance rewrite currently in negotiation in Prince George's County.
- Miscellaneous documents from the FEC:
 - Documents pertaining to working group meetings:
 - "Minutes," which are summaries of the proceedings from previous working group meetings
 - Supplementary resources, which are often used to prepare council members and participants for an upcoming meeting. For example, prior to a Local Food Production meeting, the PGCFEC program director compiled and dispersed a packet detailing examples of different food hub initiatives in the U.S. These examples were meant to illustrate various existing policy frameworks for food hub programs, in order to inspire working group members and participants when brainstorming and drafting policy recommendations in the upcoming meeting.
- Documents published by organizations or departments within the FEC's network. For example, SMADC has published numerous documents providing contextual information for southern Maryland (including Prince George's County), such as a report titled "Existing and Emerging Food Hubs in Maryland 2015."

DATA ANALYSIS

In keeping with principles of qualitative studies, I conducted data analysis and data collection simultaneously (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Given the systems thinking that applies to the study, I

attempted to ensure the analysis was recursive, in order to fully consider the interlinkages between system components (Bawden, 1991). This was bolstered by rounds of coding, a form of textual analysis which allowed me to identify and deeply examine emerging themes and relationships (Miles & Huberman, 1994:56). Textual coding was the main method used for data analysis. Similar to the method of directed content analysis, I used a conceptual framework (from the aforementioned literature review on page 28) to pre-determine coding categories before beginning data collection. I built initial coding categories based on the principles that emerged from the literature review. By using a standardized set of coding categories, I was better able to converge the multiple sources of data. However, these categories were not static: I created sub categories, new categories, and themes, as they emerged from data analysis (Cho & Lee, 2014).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Before beginning data collection, the proposal for this research was sent to the steering committee of the FEC for review. Once the committee agreed to the proposal, and to allow me to use the council as a case study, an abbreviated summary of the thesis research was sent to all prospective interviewees. Prior to each interview, verbal informed consent was obtained. Permission was granted by all interviewees to use an audio recording device. Before conducting observations of working group meetings, the FEC's program director announced my research to the council's members and working group participants. Working group meetings were not recorded. As mentioned previously, the discussions in these meetings were organic and heartfelt, and I felt that using a recording device would have threatened the authenticity of the discourse in these meetings.

The final report of this thesis will be disseminated to all participants in this research and will be made available to the entire council, via the FEC's program director.

EVALUATION OF RESEARCH

As the premise and methods of this thesis fall under the category of social research and the assumption of constructivism, I will discuss the evaluation of my work in terms of trustworthiness, as outlined by Guba (1981) and Guba & Lincoln (1994). The use of trustworthiness – which is characterized by credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability – aligns with my assumption of constructivism, as these criteria presume that there can be multiple constructions and descriptions of social phenomena.

According to Yin's textbook on case study research, the use of case study methodology allows the researcher to obtain data from multiple sources (2014:119). In my case study, I have three main sources of evidence: interviews, observations, and documents. Thus, this data triangulation fulfills the credibility criteria for trustworthiness, a criteria which is similar in concept to internal validity (Guba, 1981; Bryman, 2012:390). Data triangulation allows the researcher to compare multiple sources of evidence to one another, to ensure coherency across sources that is free of contradictions (Guba, 1981).

With regards to transferability, Guba explains that it is difficult to make generalizations because a specific case is affected by the time and context in which it is positioned (Guba, 1981). However, it is possible that “some transferability between two contexts may occur because of certain essential similarities between them” (*ibid*). To facilitate comparison of my results with other cases, I attempted to provide “thick” description of data during the collection and analysis processes (Geertz 1973, see Guba, 1981). I did this by adding detailed contextual information about the FEC case in this report, and provided a literature review of food policy councils as a point of reference. In addition, my conceptual framework of agroecology movements serves as a working hypothesis which is transferrable to other food policy council contexts (Guba, 1981). By using my thick descriptive data, researchers will be better able to test “the degree of fittingness” to other cases (*ibid*).

Guba (1981) likens the criteria of dependability to that of reliability in quantitative research. To achieve dependable research, I strove to maintain an “audit trail” of detailed records of my work throughout the data collection, analysis, and reporting processes (Guba, 1981). This includes interview transcriptions, coding notes, field notes, and brainstorming notes from data analysis.

Finally, I attempted to achieve confirmability – a parallel to objectivity – through triangulation of data and practicing reflexivity during the research process (Guba, 1981).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first part of the results section is composed of an overview of the Prince George’s County Food Equity Council, e.g. organizational structure. These characteristics of the FEC are included in the results section because much of the information was derived from interviews. Following sections – which are reported using the conceptual framework from page 28 – use the aforementioned data collection methods and literature to report results and provide discussion.

PRINCE GEORGE’S COUNTY FOOD EQUITY COUNCIL

The Prince George’s County Food Equity Council (henceforth referred to as the FEC) was born out of the Port Towns Community Health Partnership (Port Towns CHP), which is a multi-stakeholder partnership that involves community members, organizations, schools, businesses, local government, and funders, according to the Port Towns CHP’s webpage (Place Matters Prince George’s County, 2016). Port Towns CHP was established in 2008 and works in Prince George’s County to reduce obesity and improve community wellbeing by promoting healthy eating and active living (referred to as HEAL). Founded in 2013, the FEC is incubated within the Institute for Public Health Innovation (IPHI), a nonprofit organization which is headquartered in nearby Washington, D.C. According to interviews with founding members, the IPHI was awarded a grant to establish a food policy council, and collaborated with the Port Towns CHP to develop the FEC. The council is financially housed within IPHI. IPHI provides a resources advisor, who is treated as a paid staff member and provides technical assistance to the council.

The FEC contains about 20 members (the number is not static as the council is taking in new members following its recent recruitment process), and one paid staff member who acts as the council's program director. The members have backgrounds and careers in hunger relief/anti-hunger advocacy organizations, consulting, local universities, nonprofit urban farm initiatives, food retail outlets, and government departments (e.g., health department, social services, and park and planning department).

At the beginning of the FEC's relatively new existence, the council held a strategic planning retreat, wherein members worked to develop common definitions for terms (e.g. "healthy") as well as to develop visions, missions, and areas of focus for future action. Several interviewees mentioned that while this initial planning retreat allowed for the harmonization of goals and action items, the members were unsuccessful in constructing agreed-upon, common definitions of terms. From this initial strategic planning period of the council, goals of the council were constructed and three working groups were established based on perceived needs of the county's demographic.

Various documents from the FEC's website indicate the FEC's overarching mission:

"The mission of the Prince George's County Food Equity Council is to significantly improve public health and community well-being of all who live, work, study, worship and play in the County. It will develop and support policies, approaches, procedures, practices and initiatives to create systemic change to the local food system, promoting health, economic opportunity, food security, and well-being, especially among communities that have been negatively impacted by the current food system" (FEC, 2014).

A document published by the FEC – which is directed toward the general public – defines a food policy council, and elaborates on the council's vision:

"- Develop and advance comprehensive policies and programs to address the social determinants of food equity and related health effects.

- Integrate food system planning into all County economic and community development.

- Ensure the availability, affordability and accessibility of healthy, sustainable, culturally appropriate food for all who eat in Prince George's County.

- Expand the reach and impact of nutrition programs for low-income people including federal nutrition assistance programs and emergency food assistance.

- Create countywide awareness of the role healthy food plays in the health and wellbeing of residents" (FEC, *What's A Food Council?*:2).

The same document provides an explanation behind the choice of the name, Food Equity Council, rather than Food Policy Council:

“For the Prince George’s County Food Equity Council, the bottom line is people – not just food. Food equity means being able to find healthy, affordable, sustainable, culturally-appropriate, safe food in all neighborhoods. It also means working toward justice and economic opportunity from seed to fork. This is the first food policy council in the country to be called a Food Equity Council, showing Prince George’s County’s leadership in promoting equity through food system change” (FEC, What’s A Food Council?:1).

Below are the three groups and respective goals:

Local Food Production group – **“Goal:** *Promote economic viability and equity through local food production, processing, and distribution.*”

Healthy Food Retail – **“Goal:** *Increase economic and marketing opportunities for both existing and new healthy food retailers.*”

Healthy Eating and Nutrition Education – **“Goal:** *Alleviate the burden of hunger, prevent the spread of diet-related chronic disease, and support policies that promote food equity.*”

Each group has several listed strategies (on the FEC website) which are meant to guide the groups toward achieving their goals. These strategies are advanced with action items. According to the program director, action items are ongoing and the work of action items are divided among working group members. For example, a current strategy of the Healthy Food Retail Group is to advocate for the inclusion of healthy menu options in the county’s food trucks (which coincides with the FEC’s work with Food Truck Hub legislation [see below table of the FEC’s policy and program activities]). To advance this strategy, the working group is reviewing research of similar healthy food truck initiatives in other counties; drafting proposed guidelines and evaluation tools for the inclusion of healthy meals in food trucks; and identifying potential partners to work with.

The FEC also organizes a full-council meeting every two months. In an interview with the FEC program director, it was mentioned that many council members felt isolated to their specific working groups, as those group participants are the primary people a member engages with in the council. To address this feeling of isolation and to foster stronger cohesion among the entire council, the full-council meetings allot an hour at the beginning of the session wherein each group is able to showcase what they have been working on. Each working group shares their recent action items and members have the opportunity to engage in inter-group conversation. For example, a member from the Local Food Production working group may have a suggestion for a new action item that would be relevant for another working group to take on. During the general FEC meeting that was included in the data collection, the second half of the session involved presentations which disseminated news, announcements, and updates on upcoming local and regional events, FEC-related activities, and state- and national-level legislation.

Leadership of the council manifests in numerous ways. First, the program director of the FEC acts as a central point of contact for internal and external communication for the council. The

responsibilities of the program director include updating the FEC website, publishing social media posts, speaking at conferences on behalf of the FEC, grant-writing, maintaining relationships with donors, facilitating working group meetings, recruiting new council members, and holding current members accountable for their responsibilities. In addition, the program director highlighted in her interview that she also focuses on relationship-building with county council members¹³ and other influential actors in the policy arena. Besides the program director, there is a steering committee, which handles time-sensitive decisions, membership selection, ongoing strategic planning, and agenda-setting for meetings. An FEC advisory committee is composed of people who are not able to commit to being a council member, but are essential strategic advisors to the FEC. For example, a county councilwoman, who was originally a member of the FEC prior to beginning her term, is now part of the advisory committee. Finally, each working group has two co-chairs. According to data from observations and interviews with co-chairs, the duties of a co-chair include regularly attendance and facilitation of meetings. At the time of data collection, the council was beginning to transfer the responsibility of managing working groups from the program director to newly-appointed co-chairs. Interviewees indicated that this transfer of responsibility would better distribute the work of the council, and would give the program director more time to focus on her other responsibilities and capacity-building of the council.

Below is a list of activities the council has engaged in previously or is currently involved with. This list is not exhaustive, but includes activities which were prominent or frequently mentioned during data collection:

Policy Activities:

- **Zoning ordinance rewrite:**
 - At the end of the data collection period, FEC members discussed taking the Zoning Ordinance Rewrite Team on a tour of local urban agricultural initiatives, to raise awareness of the role these farms and organizations play in the community. Urban agriculture in Prince George's County is restricted on areas where it can operate in the county. A month after the data collection period ended, it was found that a new bill was submitted, which would open several areas of the county to urban agriculture.
 - The FEC publicly supports another local organization's "Evaluations and Recommendations Report," which proposed solutions for the ongoing zoning ordinance rewrite in Prince George's County. The FEC added on to this report to offer its own solutions for the rewrite, focusing on farmland preservation in the county, the expansion of urban agriculture, and improved access to healthy food.

¹³ In the state of Maryland, county councils constitute the elected legislative arm of local governments. In Prince George's County, nine county council members represent the districts of the county and typically serve four-year terms.

- The FEC offered its research and assistance to the Zoning Ordinance Rewrite Team.
- **Food Truck Hub legislation:** The FEC worked closely with a county council member during the writing process, along with several other community members and organizations. The legislation passed in 2016 and legalizes mobile food vending in the county. As part of this law, an Oversight Committee was created to ensure the successful implementation of the policy, given that it is a novel piece of legislation for Prince George's County.
- **Advocacy¹⁴ for funding of the Agriculture Marketing Specialist position:** The agriculture marketing specialist in Prince George's County is a publicly-funded position which offers extension services to farmers and local food businesses, with emphases on marketing, business development, and helping patrons to understand county regulations (UMDE, *Why an Agricultural Marketing Specialist?*). The FEC advocated for the continued funding of this position for the 2017 fiscal year.
- **Farmers Market definition and permitting:** The FEC played an advocacy role in reducing permit fees for farmers markets. The council is also working to amend the permitting process and dispel confusion of requirements for obtaining and operating with permits. The council is also advocating and suggesting changes in the definition of a farmers market and the regulations that come with it. For example, current policy mandates that farmers markets may function for 50 days per year. The FEC is working to increase this number to around 100, allowing the markets to operate twice per week.
- **Legislation updating the definition of 'urban agriculture' and 'urban farm':** From observations of working group meetings, members mention the need to create legislative language that is temporally flexible, allowing for future technological developments in urban agriculture. The county's current definition of urban agriculture includes initiatives of nonprofit organizations. The FEC is working to expand this definition, to include other organizations and individuals, so that more community actors may benefit from the urban agriculture property tax credit.
- **Helped to secure \$25,000 for the SNAP to Health Program:** In Prince George's County, the SNAP to Health Program would facilitate SNAP/EBT acceptance at farmers markets by allocating \$100,000 over three years. While the FEC's advocacy efforts helped to secure \$25,000 for this scheme, a recent budget deficit in the county led to cuts in funding for the SNAP to Health Program. The FEC continues to push for the revival of the program's funding.
- **Advocate for Urban Agriculture Property Tax Credit:** The FEC pushed for the implementation of Maryland's urban agricultural property tax credit in Prince George's County.

¹⁴ In the context of the FEC, the term 'advocacy' includes the following activities: publishing and sending open letters to local policymakers, urging them to take a specific action on an issue; call on community members to provide public testimonies for county council hearings; conduct research related to a certain issue; use social media and online presence to raise awareness of issues; and work behind-the-scenes with policymakers during the legislation-writing process.

- **Community Eligibility Provision (CEP):** The CEP is a government-funded federal initiative which provides funding for schools located in low-income areas to provide free breakfast and lunch for all students. According to the USDA, this eliminates the burden of individual households having to send in applications to qualify for school meals programs (FNS, 2015). The FEC has worked with state-level legislation – in partnership with the nonprofit organization, Maryland Hunger Solutions – to address barriers to implementation of the CEP at the county level. At the county level, the FEC works with local school administration to increase participation in the CEP.

Policy implementation, program activities, and community involvement:

- **Hear the Maryland Crunch:** The Hear the Maryland Crunch initiative is an annual event organized by the state-level nonprofit organization, Maryland Hunger Solutions. The event aims to direct attention to the importance of school breakfasts and related government-funded school breakfast programs. The FEC participates in this event at the county level, to raise awareness among school administrators of the CEP
- **Food Truck Hub Oversight Committee:** (implementation of preceding legislation)
- **Food Equity Forum:** An annual conference, hosted by the FEC. The forum is open to the public and allows the community to learn about the FEC and the intersection of food, community, health, economy, and environment.
- **Partnership in sponsoring Food Day:** In the United States, Food Day takes place on 24 October and works to raise awareness of food systems issues. According to interview data, in Prince George's County the annual Food Day is often hosted with organizations that are associated with one or more FEC members. The FEC infuses a policy focus into Food Day activities.
- **Hosted a public screening of TedxManhattan:** TedXManhattan is an independent Ted production which focuses on food and agriculture. The FEC hosted a viewing party of these Ted Talks at a local coffee shop.
- **Round table meeting:** The Prince George's County Economic Development Commission holds around \$50 million worth of funds to be distributed for local development initiatives. The FEC organized a round table meeting in February 2016 to convene food and agriculture stakeholders in the county, to identify and discuss plans to expand local food production in the county, seeking to highlight food and agriculture as opportunities for significant economic development. Based on notes which were drafted following the meeting, the three main goals of the round table were to:
 - *“Learn about the County's food system and its relationship to sustainable economic development;*
 - *Discuss the potential for food entrepreneurs and farms to drive economic growth in the County;*

- *Identify and support opportunities to transform the County into an epicenter of sustainable local food production.”*

AGROECOLOGY PRINCIPLE: INCLUSIVITY

Members of the FEC are selected through an application process and, once inaugurated into the council, commit to participating in the FEC for a two-year term. When asked about criteria for member selection, interviewees mentioned the goal of recruiting members with backgrounds or expertise from the entire food system. In an interview, one FEC member said:

“We want the whole food system, you know, production, processing, distribution...we want representatives as much as possible from each one of those.”

According to Harper et al. (2009), a food policy council’s policy activities are influenced by the membership of a council. A council with a diverse representation of the community food system will tend to address a broader range of policy issues, while having greater representation from certain sectors can skew the focus of the council towards specific issues (*ibid*). Several interviewees noted that some stakeholder groups along Prince George’s County’s food value chain have a greater representation in the council. Among these interview responses, there was a discrepancy of which stakeholder groups were perceived to have greater or lesser representation. For example, the program director observed a majority presence from the hunger relief initiatives, while noting that the council has struggled to recruit and maintain involvement from farmers, particularly rural farmers. However, in another interview, one FEC member noted that the council has struggled to engage stakeholders from the waste management sector, as well as restaurants. While past members are not documented on the website, the current members are listed, along with their areas of work. Of the listed members, two work in the production sector (farmers), two hold jobs with anti-hunger nonprofit organizations, one is a consultant for food systems analysis, three work for the government, one works in retail (at a chain grocery store), and four work in a university context (in dining services, as professors, and/or as part of university agriculture extension services). There are currently no members from waste management and restaurants.

With regard to farmer involvement in FEC activities, the program director notes that the council has cultivated a different relationship with farmers so that the FEC can still receive input from Prince George’s County’s farmers without having actual farmer members:

“We have a really hard time recruiting farmers, more than any other sector. And we have farmers that we regularly go to when we’re working on legislation, kind of like our farmer allies. And we can reach them if we need feedback on something specific or if they want to become an advocate for something they think is really important, they come out.....We’ve kind of figured out a solution that sort of work, but we’d really eventually like to see farmers who actively participate in the food council.”

In addition to these farmer allies, the FEC maintains regular contact with a representative of the local government's Soil Conservation District, who works with rural and urban farmers in the county.

While membership is selective, participation in FEC working group meetings is open to the public. Public participation in meetings varied, and there was a noticeable difference of attendance depending on the working group. For example, the Healthy Eating and Nutrition Education (HENE) working group tended to have about double the participants in attendance than in the other two working groups. Interviews with FEC members indicate that the overall perception of public participation is positive. Interviewees note that non-members can bring unique skillsets, network connections, and knowledge that may have been lacking from the working group meetings. In general, it was observed that working groups valued the input from nonmembers. One FEC interviewee explains a sentiment that is similarly mentioned among other interviews with FEC members:

"The nice thing about the work groups is that new people with new ideas can just come to the meeting or they can e-mail the program director and say, 'Hey, I have this idea' or, 'I want a collaboration on this,' and then they will participate in the work group meeting...and can bring ideas to the table. So sometimes those kinds of things will come up and we would kind of address those as they were mentioned. I think some opportunities for collaboration came up that way...so that was a nice aspect, where you can kind of pull other people in."

While the members seemed to value public inclusion in working group meetings, interviewees highlight consistency and demographic of participation as issues that should be addressed in the future. When discussing attendance of these community citizens, some interviewees highlighted the issues of maintaining consistent and diverse participants: namely, physical availability of the meetings, language barriers, and timing of meetings (the meetings are typically held on weekdays in the afternoon or early evening). The program director hits on key points which were mentioned in several interviews:

"We do have people who come to our work group meetings who are not professionally engaged in food, but have a strong personal interest. But the people tend to come from a little bit higher income class, and our meetings are not accessible by public transit a lot, because they're usually at members' work places."

Social movement literature suggests that grassroots organizations relying on volunteer participation can have difficulties maintaining consistency over time (Della Porta & Diani, 2006:149). In the context of food policy councils, maintaining participation of a diverse council can be difficult because of these organizations' voluntary nature (Harper et al., 2009; Hamilton, 2002). Within the FEC, time commitment was expressed as an inconsistent resource. When asked about challenges of the FEC, some interview participants mention the challenge of sustaining engagement both with members and working group participations who are not members.

“I think, internally, you’ve got great people in the council who are really busy. And it’s very hard to be consistent with meetings and things like that when you’ve got so many things pulling at you. So it’s great to have some of the folks that are on the council on the council, but then the down side is that they’re so busy that some of them don’t make many of the meetings.”

When applied to the inclusive nature of the FEC, one interviewee discusses the predicament of aiming to fill the council with a diverse group of community stakeholders but also recruiting members who have the time to actively contribute to the council’s operations.

“In the first round of members we had members who maybe cared but really didn’t have the time to participate. So they wouldn’t come or they would send a representative, or um, they wouldn’t really be active members. So if you only have so many member slots you really need every member to be an active member.”

In improving the operations of the FEC, members have expressed the need to expand the outreach of the council, to include more community citizens who are not professionally engaged in the food system. A new position has been instated in 2016, called a communications chair. When asked about the responsibilities this role would assume, the program director and new communications chair explained that the role of the chair is still being determined. However, one focus area of the position is certain: the chair will concentrate her efforts on increasing the reach of the council, to recruit a larger base of public participants, and to cultivate consistent public engagement. The program director and communications chair mentioned this as a priority in strategic planning. The program director explains:

“We have some areas where we really need feedback, like in the zoning ordinance, for instance. It’s really going to affect people and we really need to know exactly what they want...if what we’re pushing for is something they feel is responsive to their needs and wants.”

The FEC members work to incorporate the public’s interests and attitudes about food policies in the county. For example, when first constructing the strategies of the working groups, the council conducted a literature review and review of residents’ attitudes toward food policy. The information gathered from this was used to determine action strategies.

As far as online presence, the FEC maintains a Twitter and Facebook account, in addition to their website. They also participate in a listserv, which is used to send action alerts and calls for public testimonies. Action alerts are similar to newsletters in that they inform the public of FEC proceedings and policy activities. In an interview with a member of the FEC’s advisory committee, it was explained that action alerts are also important for mobilizing public citizens to raise and direct their voices towards county policymakers. The following excerpt is an example of an action alert. This particular action alert calls on the public to provide testimony in the support of funding the agricultural marketing specialist position for the fiscal year of 2017:

**Agricultural Marketing Specialist Position:
FUNDING AT RISK**

Please testify in support of full County funding for the Agricultural Marketing Specialist position in FY2017.

The Prince George's County Planning Department is defunding the position of the Agricultural Marketing Specialist for FY2017 in response to a structural deficit.

The Agricultural Marketing Specialist, who functions in an Educator role with the University of Maryland Extension program, provides critical support for local food and agriculture enterprises through professional assistance in marketing, business development, and navigating regulations.

Many small farms and food businesses simply cannot afford to pay for similar support—making a publicly-funded position indispensable to their viability.

[Read the fact sheet on the position's responsibilities and accomplishments here.](#)

[Read our full written testimony here \(Coming Soon\).](#)

Will you testify in support of a fully funded Agricultural Marketing Specialist Position? If you would like to submit in-person or written testimony and would like support from FEC, please email [REDACTED]

Figure 2: Example of an FEC action alert

A main way that the FEC involves community citizens in council activities is through the use of public testimonies as an advocacy tool. All three modes of data collection (interviews, observations, and online documents) indicate the importance of public testimonies as a way to persuade policymakers, garner political will, and carve a space for a public voice in a legislative process that is not always readily accessible to the community:

“It’s really more important to have public testimony with the committee hearings, because once it gets to the public hearings, there’s been so much work and negotiation behind the scenes with council members that they’re very reluctant to change it. I think people pretty much go into those with an idea of what they’re going to vote, so it’s better to get them at the committee hearing. Like

I said, unless you're really working with the council member, it's really hard to draft and know the agenda...because the agenda is published so late.” – FEC program director

With regard to the indicator of ‘interdisciplinarity’ for the inclusivity principle, it is perceived that there is insufficient evidence to comment on the presence or absence of this indicator in the structure and proceedings of the FEC. This is because the term, ‘interdisciplinary,’ refers more to research environments and the merging of multiple disciplines. While there is a significant amount of research that is conducted in the FEC – e.g., to construct strategies, find relevant studies to build arguments for various policy advocacy activities, and to find examples of successful (or unsuccessful) policy initiatives in other parts of the United States – the research is perceived to be mainly in a literature review capacity. It is my contention that the data collected is insufficient in judging the extent of interdisciplinarity in the research of the FEC.

AGROECOLOGY PRINCIPLE: COMMUNITY ORIENTATION

The Port Towns CHP and IPHI – along with input from other local nonprofit organizations – developed the FEC based on a perceived need to change the county food system to better address the local context. This was particularly evident when interviewing members who have been involved with the FEC since its inception. When asked a hypothetical question of what the county might look like without the presence of the council, one interviewee explained:

“Well, they (policymakers) wouldn’t be doing anything. They wouldn’t be doing anything in regard to these issues. That’s why there was a void for many years...there’s people that came together and said ‘we need this.’ So, I don’t even think it would have been on their radar.”

Community orientation in the FEC can be seen in the overarching mission and name of the council: Prince George’s County Food Equity Council. Rather than identifying as a policy council, the FEC chose to use the word ‘equity,’ based on the unique situation of the county: above-average rates of food insecurity and obesity, characterized by a lack of access to healthful foods. As such, the mission, goals, and strategies, as well as the choice to use the word, ‘equity,’ rather than ‘policy,’ reflect the recognition that food access, food insecurity, and diet-related illness are prominent issues within the county. In an interview with a member of the FEC advisory committee, she summarizes the food access focus of the council and the decision to use ‘equity’ instead of ‘policy’:

“It was purposefully titled a little differently. That was a big discussion point....That was very deliberative to talk about it in a broader sense, in terms of, I think, a social justice and a food access approach.”

“The FEC was really interested in – when I was on there as a member – figuring out access to food options in underserved communities.”

In deciding on the name and overarching theme of the FEC, one interviewee reflected on a meeting she had with Mark Winne, who is widely considered a pioneer of the local food policy council model:

“He had this training in San Antonio about food policy councils. So I went to that training, then I had a one-on-one with him. And I mentioned that we are going to name this a ‘food equity council,’ and he said ‘no, don’t do that.’ I said, ‘why?’ He said, ‘because it doesn’t make sense.’ I said, ‘it makes so much sense to us...and we really insist on this one.’” – FEC member

During the first year of the FEC’s existence, the members spent time determining the needs and wants of the community. In better understanding the community, the FEC engaged with county stakeholders to hear their input. While the council represents a diversity of stakeholders, soliciting feedback from a broader audience allowed the FEC to gain insight that they previously did not have. As one interviewee explains:

“We also did some soliciting of stakeholder feedback and worked with pulling together some folks who are value-added producers, kind of craft producers of food products...trying to get a sense of: What do they envision are some of the barriers to growth of the food businesses that they operate in the county? And it was actually those discussions initially that got us into a lot of the permitting...identifying that permitting was an area that was kind of confusing for people...and that there needed to be some light shed on what the process was like, and help to build some consistency around what various people were told when they went in to get a permit, and those kinds of things.”

In social movement discourse, resource mobilization theory highlights the importance of resources as defining the activities, successes, and failures of social movements and social movement organizations. As explained by Della Porta & Diani (2006:141), resources of a social movement are often regarded in terms of money and time commitment from people. From this perspective, and from the agroecological perspective of labor as a resource, it was inferred from the data that the ‘local procurement’ indicator of community orientation manifests in the demographic of FEC members (Timmermann & Félix, 2015). This is because the majority of the members and public participants present during the period of data collection live and/or work within Prince George’s County. In this sense, the people and time are locally sourced.

The indicator of ‘local procurement’ is found to be present in many of the policy activities of the council, but is particularly present in the ongoing efforts to establish a regional food hub within Prince George’s County. The advocacy for a food hub – also referred to as a food aggregation center and agriculture innovation center – to be housed within Prince George’s County reflects the FEC’s acknowledgement that the county’s farmers, consumers, retailers, and local economy could benefit from this food hub being housed within the geopolitical boundary of Prince George’s County. As explained in an interview with a representative from the Soil Conservation District (who works closely with the FEC to advocate on behalf of the county’s farmers), the aggregation

center could be economically beneficial for the county's farmers, who are still recovering from losing tobacco as a commodity crop:

“There’s nothing really out there...nothing...there’s not a silver bullet to save the farmer. And ultimately it’s because we don’t have the infrastructure to make all this happen. So, and by infrastructure I mean this ag center. And I think...in my opinion...the ag center is the key to economic success for farmers.”

The indicator of ‘horizontal structures and knowledge’ was found to have a presence in the proceedings of the working group and general FEC meetings. This is because the meetings are used by members and participants to share recent engagements or news that they may have gathered from another part of their lives (i.e. professional careers, volunteering with an organization, etc.). For example, during the general FEC meeting, which took place in late March 2016, an FEC member – who is professionally involved with a state-level anti-hunger advocacy organization – shared news of state- and national-level legislation aimed at addressing hunger and poverty.

When looking at the power dynamics of a social movement organization, Della Porta & Diani (2006:142) explain that SMO’s often must find an appropriate balance between leadership roles and the inherently participatory nature of grassroots democracy. From this perspective, it is perceived that the governing framework of the FEC follows a horizontal structure, rather than hierarchical (Della Porta & Diani, 2006:142). In the FEC, the program director acts as a central point of contact for both internal and external relations of the council. Actions taken by the program director in terms of action items and strategies are either agreed upon or voted on beforehand (although, interviewees indicated that there was only one instance in the past wherein a vote was necessary, because a consensus could not be reached). For example, during working group meetings, the program director frequently asked the group what the “next step forward” should be, such as, who should she contact? What meetings should she set up? What messages should she relay to the policymakers who are working with the FEC on a particular piece of legislation? Similarly, the roles of working group co-chairs can be considered that of facilitators. As alluded to earlier, the co-chairs mainly plan the agendas for meetings and ensure that the members and non-members stick to the outlined agenda, during the actual meeting.

FOOD SYSTEMS APPROACH: CONVERGENCE OF INCLUSIVITY AND COMMUNITY ORIENTATION

At their best, food policy councils are able to use a food systems approach that is inclusive of a broad range of community stakeholders (Hamilton, 2002). The FEC’s policy activities – and food policy councils in general – tend to reflect the membership of the council, and even the members and participants who happen to be attending a working group meeting on a particular day. Harper et al. (2009) explains that food policy councils may have difficulties obtaining and maintaining a full representation of the food system, and this can reflect in the policy activities of a council. The FEC program director noted that the council’s policy advocacy leans toward food access and

hunger alleviation, given the higher representation from anti-hunger organizations and lower representation from farmers.

At the beginning of a food policy council's existence, it is common for a council to gravitate towards policy activities which are easier to obtain in the short term. This happens because councils often need to build credibility with initial policy wins; indeed, a council may only be able to pursue this "low-hanging fruit" *because* they do not have enough community recognition to pursue bigger actions (Harper et al., 2009). Research on food policy councils finds that councils use these initial successes to build credibility and political capital in the community (McRae, 2002, see Borron, 2003). The FEC is no exception, and it was found both in interviews and observations that the first two years of the council's activities often leaned toward the low-hanging fruit. For example, the council has focused on farmers market permitting issues which applied to recent years, and worked to dispel confusion of permitting requirements among farmers market vendors. One FEC member explains:

"I think, since the group itself is all very new and this whole concept is new to everyone who's participating, the focus has been on things that are much more along the lines of low-hanging fruit...to be able to participate in the conversation, engage on advocacy to people who are stakeholders of the food equity council. And to try to work through some of those more immediate issues."

Much of the work done by the FEC focuses on identifying and breaking down barriers, such as barriers to implementing programs or policies. Borron (2003) indicates that many food policy councils work to ascertain community needs and then determine what issues to address and relevant actors to contact, in order to realize these needs. One example of this is seen in the FEC's work with the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). Recognizing some of the barriers to implementing the CEP in school systems, the FEC engaged in state-level advocacy to amend legislation. In addition to state-level advocacy, the FEC works with local school administrators to promote the implementation of the CEP.

Interviews and an observation of the general FEC meeting indicate that the council is beginning to shift its strategic planning to adopt a longer-term focus, as well as a focus on policy implementation. The recently-formed food truck hub oversight committee is an example of a collaborative effort of community actors, policymakers, and the FEC in ensuring a locally-appropriate implementation of the food truck hub legislation. The diverse group of policymakers and stakeholders involved in the legislative drafting process were particularly focused on ensuring the success of the bill in its implementation. One FEC advisory committee member, who was involved in the drafting of the food truck hub bill, says:

"There was a discussion of kind of enabling food trucks in the county, and because we're such a large county and very rural, but also urban, we had to kind of figure out a framework that worked. It's easier if you're just Washington, D.C. in some ways, because I think it's fairly urbanized...but

we had to figure out a rationale that worked for the entire county. And so having the FEC at the table was a pretty important part of that.”

“There’s two things we did differently on this legislation. So one is that oversight committee, that will meet regularly to sort of review how everything’s working and make additional recommendations. We don’t always do that when we package regulations, but it was a suggestion, once again that the FEC thought was important. Frankly, a lot of my nonprofit partners thought was important. It actually made a lot of sense, and it allowed those folks who had been involved in the process to continue to be involved in the process. And then the other piece about it is that the FEC has continued to be a good partner as we rolled out the implementation, so last Thursday the agency rolled out the regulations and the background on it, and they’re continuing to be active supporters on the legislation as well, and help with the implementation. And I think also will have feedback on it too.”

Some researchers, such as Mark Winne, contend that food policy councils should focus primarily on policy activities, rather than program activities. Schiff (2008) notes, though, that enabling and supporting the implementation of policies can also boost a council’s political capital within the community.

FOOD SYSTEMS APPROACH: THE ROLE OF NETWORKS

The results from data collection point towards networks as a critical component of the FEC’s operations, as well as a unique interplay with several principles of agroecology. Literature from social movement studies and food policy councils offer support and explanation for the role of networks in the FEC. Within the existing neoliberal structures that dominate economics and politics, emerging global justice movements are mobilizing and addressing issues through an alternative paradigm: namely, these movements rely on the power of networks to catalyze change (Juris, 2004:341). Social movement research explains that these decentralized networks use horizontal exchanges to connect diverse actors, while valuing grassroots participatory democracy and self-management (Juris, 2004:342; Della Porta & Diani, 2006:160-61). In re-shaping collective action to include broad-based networks, Juris (2004:351) contends that these network-based movements constitute a new political ideal.

In the context of social movements, organizations serve as conveners of movement networks and are important for garnering political weight and growing chances of success in advocacy efforts; they can also serve as a safety net in times of instability (Della Porta & Diani, 2006:160-61). A social movement organization is able to adapt to changing environments and can stimulate innovation, and “allows some kind of mediation between the participatory ethos behind grassroots organizing and the coordination guaranteed by formal structures” (*ibid*). For the food movement, food policy councils serve as network organizations which connect the various actors and components of food systems, under one roof (Schiff, 2008).

As a social movement organization, food policy councils are able to harness the resources of their networks, through various means. An emerging method of resource mobilization is to use the internet as a communicative medium for expanding networks and reaching broader audiences (Juris, 2004:347). This could be seen with the online presence of the FEC. The FEC's participation in online networks – such as listservs and social media – allow them to engage the community by circulating news, disseminating research, and calling for action (e.g., public testimonies and action alerts). These kind of activities/ways of working have been highlighted in the reviewed literature (e.g. Juris, 2004:348; Della Porta & Diani, 2006:155).

Resource mobilization benefits from a diversity of groups and actors in a network (Gerlach, 2001:293). Having been conceived from the collaboration of numerous local organizations, the FEC is able to tap into pre-existing networks and relationships to develop a wider outreach to the Prince George's County community. In an interview with the FEC program director, she posited that using these existing relationships could catalyze a broader engagement with the county's citizens. This is because many of the actors in the FEC's network – e.g., the Port Towns CHP and Maryland Hunger Solutions – have been established for a longer time, allowing them to develop more community connections.

The FEC program director indicates the accessibility and utility of these relationships:

“We emerged from the Port Towns Community Health Partnership. So that's like a collaboration of four towns: a bunch of nonprofits, funders, and so on. But so the towns, you know, some of the nonprofits have really strong relationships with community members. So I'm hoping that we can kind of build off their relationships and co-host events with them, and being very strategic with getting people's input.”

As another example of the utility of networks for mobilizing resources, some councils use these relationships to obtain resources in the form of labor and time. For the City of Hartford Advisory Committee on Food Policy and the Austin Food Policy Council, relationships with other local nonprofit organizations has allowed these councils to obtain resources such as staff time, website support, and help with policy projects (Borron, 2003).

Earlier results indicate the importance of working groups in developing action items and strategies, but the working groups are also an essential mechanism for connecting the various food system interests of the FEC and “including those not typically asked to be involved when agricultural policy is discussed” (Hamilton, 2002:443). Gerlach (2001:289-90) characterizes social movement networks as integrated, segmentary, and having multiple centers of influence. In other words, social movement networks are fluid, with groups forming, dying, and joining together, and actors who have overlapping memberships in different movement groups (Gerlach, 2001:290). From this context, the working groups are perhaps the most prominent example of an integrated network and “convergence of diversity” that occurs in the FEC (Harper et al., 2009).

Working group meetings provide a space for Prince George's County's stakeholders – and food policy councils in general – to convene and understand the role each of them plays in impacting the local food system (Hamilton, 2002). Indeed, these working group meetings can allow for the development of new, informal network connections and can facilitate the mobilization of resources and horizontal exchange of information and knowledge (Della Porta & Diani, 2006:127-29).

Schiff (2008) notes that in these spaces of inclusiveness, food policy councils also act as facilitators in mediating possible conflicts and developing innovative solutions from a multitude of stakeholder perspectives. From the perspective of agroecology literature, the FEC's facilitator role – particularly in the working group meetings – joins the knowledge and connections of community networks in a participatory process, allowing for collaboratively-constructed learning, definitions, and strategies for action (Mendez et al., 2013). Harper et al. (2009) highlight a key characteristic of food policy councils as having the ability to converge a diversity of stakeholders in a way that facilitates social learning. The round table meeting held in February of 2016 provides an example of the FEC's efforts to include a diversity of community stakeholders in collaboratively discussing the needs and opportunities of economic development in Prince George's County. Within the council, the diversity of membership has expanded the repertoire of knowledge of Prince George's County's food system. One FEC member explains how a diversity of membership has affected the council in circulating community knowledge:

*“I think that's one of our strengths. That there seems to be people from just about every walk of life, whether it's coming from food production and retail and the school system, the universities...there's representation throughout. And so I think it strengthens us because you have a lot of people that have lots of different knowledge, so that when we do attack or address certain issues, we've got the knowledge right there in the room. And if they¹⁵ **don't** have the knowledge, it's usually not far removed from them that they can get it.”*

In addition to sourcing, consolidating, and disseminating knowledge from members' networks, the FEC – particularly its working group meetings – is able to provide an environment that links community organizations, individuals, politicians, and institutions to each other. This finding is in line with research which explains that social movement actors can cultivate connections among organizations that they are involved in (Della Porta & Diani, 2006:134). In this capacity, the FEC and food policy councils engage in what Schiff (2008) refers to as networking facilitation. In other words, food policy councils “serve to create new networks among members' organizations and facilitate the expansion and implementation of their interests by bringing them into the broader food system context” (Schiff, 2008:217).

In Rebecca Schiff's 2008 study of food policy councils, interviewees point to these networks of diverse actors as invaluable in the sustainment of the councils' objectives and visions for their communities. Within the FEC, interviewed council members agree that the inclusive nature of the

¹⁵ In reference to the FEC members

FEC has allowed for the development of new relationships and new network connections within communities, which help to further the initiatives of the network organizations. One FEC member notes:

“I think there’s a lot of opportunity for not just networking within the council but building relationships. A good example, Jake from the nonprofit hunger relief organization, participates in the FEC and that was the first time I had heard of the organization. But since then, I was on a panel for our campus pantry at their conference last year. And we’ve hosted some of their team members here to do training for our team about food assistance programs in Maryland. So that was a really great kind of outgrowth of that type of network: understanding and seeing people who are working in the same sphere...You know, that kind of stuff happens all the time. It is nice to...the world of food...this kind of work...is not that big here, so there’s all kinds of synergy between people working on parallel projects and...so that’s always a cool opportunity.”

To summarize, data collected and analyzed from the FEC is in line with much research on FPCs:

- In regard to inclusivity, the FEC strives to garner representation from as many food system stakeholders and community members as possible. However,
- Challenges of the FEC and FPCs in general include obtaining and maintaining representation from the full spectrum of the food system. It was found that the policy activities pursued by the FEC are affected by the demographic of its members.
- Community orientation is present in the efforts and achievements of the FEC. For example, the Food Truck Hub Oversight Committee was developed from the preceding legislation as an anticipated need for ensuring that the new bill would be properly implemented in Prince George’s County. The council’s advocacy for the Agriculture Innovation Center reflects the organization’s understanding of the need for local economic development.
- A strength of the FEC and FPCs is its/their ability to act as network facilitators. In the context of the FEC, this primarily occurs in working group meetings. These meetings are a critical arena for the dissemination of news and horizontal exchange of knowledge, particularly in state-, regional-, and local-level contexts. The networks also benefit the FPCs, which can tap into the extensive repertoire of resources to advance council activities.

REFLECTIONS OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The qualitative data collection was a humbling experience for me. One criticism that I have for my interviewing is that I unknowingly used leading questions on occasion. In one particular example, I asked interview participants, “How do you think the FEC has gained credibility in its short existence?” I originally constructed this question because of an earlier interview, wherein the informant explained that the FEC has accumulated respect and credibility in a short amount of time.

However, I did not stop to think that this is an *opinion* and should be treated as such. When I asked this credibility question to a later informant, I was humbled when he answered, “*This question presumes that the FEC even has credibility.*” He was, of course, correct. I immediately realized that my question was leading, and altered the wordage for later interviews.

As mentioned in the research paradigm section of this paper, using a case study methodology allows the researcher to both generate and refine hypotheses, as well as to test their efficacy (Yin, 2014:30; Vennesson, 2008). In the context of this research, the principles of agroecology, derived from literature, were modified through the data collection process. For example, I originally considered participatory approaches to working as a completely separate principle from inclusivity and community orientation. Through the data collection and ongoing reading of literature, however, my understanding of participatory methods evolved to consider these methods as an indicator which is inherently inclusive and community oriented.

From the beginning of my study, I was adamant about incorporating concepts from social movement literature, as this was something that is lacking in much of the discourse around agroecology as a movement. However, this proved to be more difficult than I anticipated. This is because social movements have received so much scholarly attention from social scientists that it is considered its own field of study, with numerous theories and interpretations. Merging three bodies of literature – agroecology, food policy councils, and social movements – in my analysis turned out to be a bigger undertaking than I imagined. Consequently, I felt that I was “cherry-picking” concepts from the field of social movements, and felt that I was reducing the complexity of social movements to the selection of just a few characteristics. Further research of agroecology as a movement should consider agroecology in various contexts of social movements: e.g. its relationship with social movement organizations, the temporal dimension of social movements, the concept of collective identity, and resource mobilization.

When constructing the conceptual framework for principles and goals of agroecology as a movement, I do not feel that my constructed framework reflects the fluidity of these principles and the iterative nature of agroecology. My interpretation of the literature leads me to contend that agroecology as a movement cannot have an end point. Unlike many social movements, which disband once they have accomplished their goals, the goals of agroecology necessarily invoke a constant innovation process of reflection and adaptation. The very definition of a resilient system involves introspection and adaptation; and I believe further research should investigate the relationship between agroecology movements and the processual nature of resilient and equitable systems.

When considering the food policy council model with an agroecology discourse, it is noteworthy to mention that addressing farm-level production methods is not always emphasized in councils’ activities. This is the case for my case study, but perhaps other studies will have a production-oriented focus. In the case of the FEC, a greater focus is placed on increasing consumers’ access to healthy, affordable foods. This may be attributable both to the prevalence of food insecurity in

Prince George's County, as well as the demographic of FEC membership (i.e., at the time of data collection there was less representation from farmers in the council). However, as has been indicated in the literature review of food policy councils, the activities of these organizations vary from council to council, because they work within their local contexts. For example, the Santa Fe Food Policy Council in New Mexico focuses on production-related matters, such as the cultivation of genetically modified organisms, water conservation, and crop diversification (SFFPC, 2016). Additionally, the Washtenaw County Food Policy Council in Michigan developed a special Pollinators working group to raise awareness of the importance of pollinators in food production. Some activities of this group include providing workshops for landscapers and policymakers, and offering recommendations for community institutions (WCFPC, 2016).

CONCLUSION

In recent decades, collective action has gained traction as a response to corporate food regimes (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011). Numerous offshoots of a broader, global food movement have addressed various shortcomings of food systems, following progressive and radical trends. While these movements vary in their foci, they are ultimately working under the same overarching goal to reform and restructure food systems around the world (*ibid*).

This thesis research set out to understand the interconnectivity of two food movements – agroecology and food policy councils – and to relate the results to concepts from social movements and social movement organizations. As a unit of analysis, I derived a conceptual framework from existing literature of agroecology as a science, movement, and practice (Wezel et al., 2009). From this literature review it was found that agroecological movements may practice two key principles: inclusivity and community orientation. These principles interact in a process of innovation to facilitate the adoption of a food systems approach, a cornerstone of agroecology. Through this approach, agroecological movements strive to cultivate resilience and equity, thus maximizing the long-term benefits of food systems (Mendez et al., 2013). While agroecology movements are integral in the scaling up of agroecology practices, they also serve to complement and strengthen other food movements, through the principles (Rosset & Martinez-Torres, 2012; Fernandez et al., 2013). Research suggests that agroecology in movement form can be a vehicle for change, through “institutional innovation, adaptive management, and social learning” (Tomich et al., 2011:209).

Holt-Giménez & Shattuck (2011) and literature on food policy councils highlight these councils as potential bridges between different food movements and their interests. Using the aforementioned conceptual framework in the context of the Prince George's County Food Equity Council, it was found that food policy councils work in some capacity to be inclusive and community oriented, and both movements value a system-based approach (Fernandez et al., 2013). In the case of the FEC it was found that these principles are most noticeable in working group meetings, which are epicenters of activity. These meetings use participatory methods to produce strategies and action

items geared toward influencing the council's food system approach. Data from the FEC case study supports literature which indicates that food policy councils include stakeholders and citizens whose voices are usually excluded from the policy arena (Hamilton, 2002). In this way, food policy councils provide an opportunity to "democratize the food system" (Harper et al., 2009:6).

As a social movement organization, it was found that food policy councils play an important role in converging social networks, an important role in improving the social, economic, and environmental welfare of communities (Tomich et al., 2011). By including a diversity of community stakeholders in its proceedings, a food policy council is able to mobilize resources and political capital, and is able to better understand and respond to the various needs of a community (Della Porta & Diani, 2006:160-61). Convening diverse stakeholders also allows for a horizontal flow of information, as each individual comes from a different sector of the food system and often has a unique repertoire of knowledge (Borron, 2003; Harper et al., 2009).

It was found in the case study – and corroborated with literature – that the inclusive nature of food policy councils can enable the development of comprehensive food policies which reflect the needs and interests of community stakeholders (Harper et al., 2009). However, the demographic of a council can determine the types of policies which are more often pursued, e.g. anti-hunger legislation (Yeatman, 1994; Dahlberg et al., 1997). In this vein, one main challenge faced by food policy councils is recruiting and maintaining representation from across the entire food value chain and food system (Harper et al., 2009). In furthering research of agroecology as a movement, it is suggested that studies compare agroecology with various concepts and theories from social movement literature.

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“If my mind can conceive it and my heart can believe it – then I can achieve it.”¹⁶

Furthermore, in reflecting on the contributions to the successful completion of this master thesis, I would be remiss not to mention the non-human factors:

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Finally, I would like to thank the Academy. Not because it contributed to the completion of this thesis, but because this is likely the closest I will ever get to an Oscar acceptance speech.

APPENDIX: INTERVIEW GUIDE

The following are general questions which were presented to the majority of the informants. Each interview also had questions which were catered to the informant's unique relationship with the FEC.

- When and why did you join the FEC?
- Have you been involved in food systems sustainability initiatives in the past?
- In what capacity are you involved in the FEC?
- Do you have aspects of food systems that you find you are most passionate about? For example, farmers' rights, retail, etc?
- Do you find yourself interacting and collaborating with certain people/sectors in the council more than others?
- As a member of the FEC and XXXXXXXXX, do the two have a crossover?

¹⁶ Rest in peace

- How did the FEC determine the working group divisions and strategies within the working groups? Have they remained consistent or have there been changes?
- Are there certain initiatives that are more likely than others for the FEC to pursue? How come?
- In your opinion, what have been some advantages and challenges of the working groups?
- Outside of these meetings, what kind of work do members do, and how is this work determined?
- Are there stakeholder groups that are more challenging to include in FEC operations? E.g. farmers
- How do you think the FEC has gained credibility?

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Fact sheet: Food policy councils 101

Prepared by Emma Tozer

What is a food policy council?

Food policy councils (FPCs) are a relatively recent trend in the food movement, and are mostly found in the United States and Canada. FPCs work primarily at the local level to improve food systems, by helping to develop comprehensive food policy.



What is food policy?

Michael Burgan and Mark Winne – a pioneer in the FPC movement – define food policy as “a set of collective decisions made by governments at all levels, businesses, and organizations that affect how food gets from the farm to your table. A food policy can be as broad as a federal regulation on food labeling or as local and specific as a zoning law that lets city dwellers raise honeybees” (Burgan & Winne:2012:1).

Some councils function at the county and state scales. To facilitate comprehensive food policy, councils work to include as many voices from their food systems, so that they can have a holistic representation of their communities (Schiff, 2007; Harper et al., 2009). The first council was established in Knoxville, Tennessee in 1982, and since the short time since then, over 200 FPCs have developed (Roberts, 2016). Councils often strive to include community citizens and stakeholders from the entire food value chain: production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste management (Harper et al., 2009; Hamilton, 2002). This means FPCs foster relationships with community stakeholders, such as government bodies, policymakers, civilians, businesses, and nonprofit organizations. The more diverse a council’s membership, the more likely it is to address a wider range of problems in food systems (Borron, 2003). Furthermore, the implications of FPCs’ activities can stretch beyond food-related issues to address local economic development, public health, and poverty (Harper et al., 2009; Burgan & Winne, 2012).

Considerations for starting a council: There is no blueprint for making a successful FPC (Harper et al., 2009). The success of a council depends significantly on the local political environment and

WHAT ARE SOME FPC ACTIVITIES?

FPCs often influence policy and policymakers through an advisory capacity, but they can also work on *implementing* policies and developing community programs. Here are some examples of what FPCs do:

- Help to reform zoning ordinances
- Food system assessments
- Advocate for farmland preservation
- Buy local campaigns
- Improve access and participation of food assistance programs such as SNAP
- Publish and disseminate research and educational materials to policymakers and citizens
- Improve transportation routes to strengthen food access
- Improve access to extension services for farmers

Sources: Harper et al., 2009; Burgan & Winne, 2012; Schiff, 2007; Hamilton, 2002; Borron, 2003

community context. However, there are some factors to take into consideration:

Strategic planning: Will the prospective council concentrate on policy advocacy and representation of community stakeholders in legislative development? Or will the council focus its efforts on programs or policy implementation? Some of all three? When establishing a council, strategic planning is an integral *first step*, as well as an *ongoing process* in an FPC's organizational structure. A council will need to bring together its diverse members to collaboratively construct common definitions, values, and missions for the organization (Burgan & Winne, 2012). In particular, it is important to develop these common understandings in the initial years of a council's existence. An FPC can begin to do this by conducting a community food system assessment, which would help the council gain a holistic understanding of its food and agriculture. During initial

What questions should be asked when conducting a community food system assessment? Here are some examples:

- Do all citizens have access to healthy, affordable, and culturally-appropriate food? If not, what are the barriers?
- What is needed to preserve existing farmland?
- Is farming economically, socially, and environmentally viable? What sort of assistance is available or unavailable to farmers?
- What do community members perceive to be strengths and weaknesses of the food markets in their neighborhoods?
- Are there issues associated with farmers markets (e.g. permitting issues for vendors)?
- Are there impediments to operating small and local food businesses (e.g. food trucks)?
- Is there a food hub in the community? Is there a need for one?

(Derived from Burgan & Winne, 2012)

strategic planning, a council should also decide on how to divide its work. FPCs often create subcommittees to address specific components of councils' goals (Burgan & Winne, 2012; Harper et al., 2009). Leadership should also be addressed in the first years of a council's operations. The most common allocations of power take the form of steering committees, chairs, and executives (Harper et al., 2009).

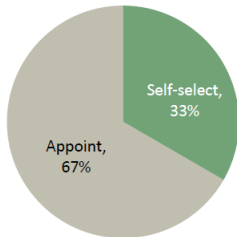
Government or nongovernment association: Councils can function within a government department or can be established by nonprofit organizations or

grassroots networks. There are advantages and disadvantages for each. An FPC may enjoy reliable, consistent funding when housed within a government agency (Harper et al., 2009). However, councils that are associated with governments are also susceptible to the uncertainties of political turnover, i.e. "the shifting sands of politics" (Harper et al., 2009:38). In addition, government-affiliated FPCs may not be as free to openly criticize governmental policies and actions, and may not have as much input from food advocates as FPCs that are unaffiliated with government (Borron, 2003; Burgan & Winne, 2012).

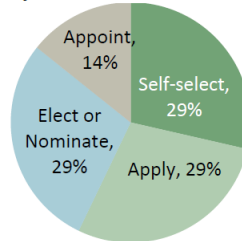
Staff: The presence – or absence – and capacity of staff are critical factors which affect the degree of policy activity an FPC engages in (Hamilton, 2002). At present, most FPCs are either unstaffed or have only one part-time staff member, forcing councils to depend on volunteers and members to perform administrative tasks (Harper et al., 2009).

Member selection: Because a council's work is heavily influenced by the degree of membership diversity, the selection of new members can shape a council's future endeavors. It is important to take in people with different viewpoints and priorities, and to have a mix of experts and community citizens (Burgan & Winne, 2012). The main methods of member selection include self-selection, appointing, application processes, and electing or nominating (Harper et al., 2009). The following graph from Harper et al. (2009) shows the different ways councils select members, compared between state-, county-, and local-level FPCs:

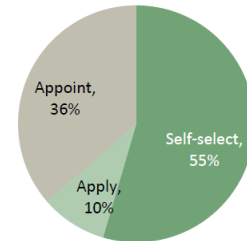
State FPC Selection Process



County FPC Selection Process



Local FPC Selection Process



Finally, given the growing popularity of food policy councils in communities, there are many resources which help new councils to get on their feet, as well as resources which offer advice and troubleshooting for existing FPCs. The Johns Hopkins University Center for a Livable Future's FoodPolicyNetworks.org provides an extensive resource database, directory, listserv, communication platform, and training materials for food policy councils. In addition, several manuals exist which aim to help new councils establish themselves, e.g. the FPC Manual co-authored by Michael Burgan and Mark Winne (see references below). There are also many examples of successful councils that have gained widespread recognition for their ingenuity, such as the [Toronto Food Policy Council](#), [Detroit Food Policy Council](#), and the [Oakland Food Policy Council](#).

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